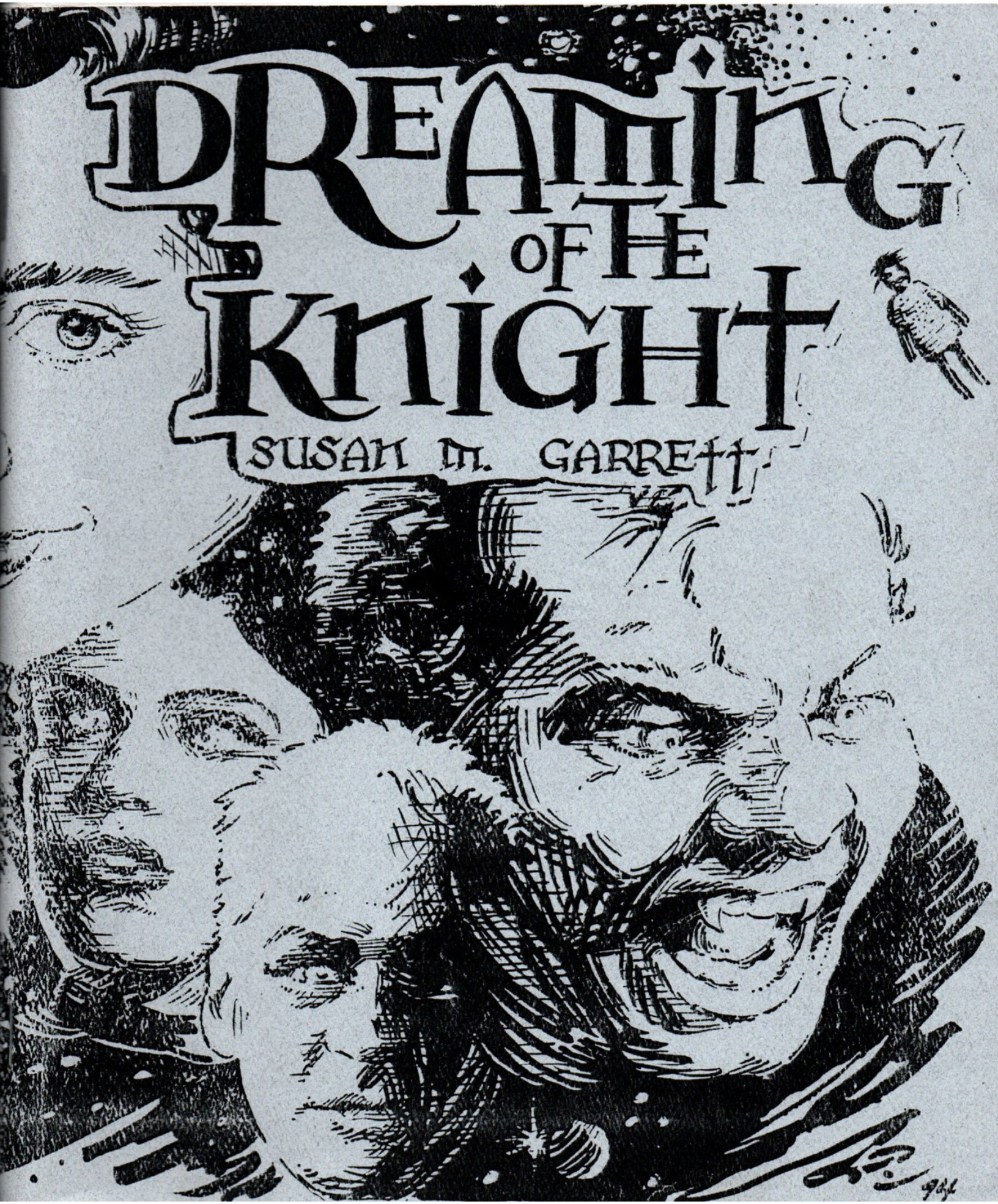
DREAMING OF THE KNIGHT
SUSAN M. GARRETT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Dreaming of the Knight

A *Forever Knight* Story

Written by
Susan M. Garrett

Artwork by
Ann Larimer

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Editorial

Susan M. Garrett

This is a fairy tale. This is *only* a fairy tale. In the event that this was real fiction, you would be advised as to when and where to mail your check or money order.

Let me explain.

I didn't need another fandom. My plate—writing and editing wise—is quite full. Not to mention this drawing thing that I've been doing for the past three years. So when *Forever Knight* first aired, I taped it, watched scattered moments (it was, after all, on in the wee hours of the morning and some of us have nine-to-five jobs, yes?), and generally shied away from getting involved.

Until I read **Forever Net**, the fanzine that contained fiction that had been posted to the Internet list (if you don't have a copy of issue one or two—run, do *not* walk, to your nearest mailbox and order a copy). To say that I was impressed with the quality of the fiction was an understatement. And it's why I broke a personal rule and actually subscribed to an on-line system for the second time in my life.

Of course, it had a fiction list. So I started writing. And writing. And writing.

As of this moment, this particular story has not been posted to the list. Not will it be . . . in this format. There are actually two versions of this story, the first being this 'fairy tale,' titled "Dreaming of the Knight." The second, which will be posted to the *Forever Knight* fiction list (FKFIC-L@PSUVM.PSU.EDU) will be vastly different in many respects and will be titled "Intimations of Mortality." It seemed the most rational way to handle some problems I had been having with the structure and content.

Special thanks should be given to my Internet fiction beta-testers: Karin Welss, Marian Gibbons, Lisa McDavid, and Sandye Chisholm. And to my real-time readers: Ann Larimer (who is enduring my latest insanity with a combination of patience, grace, and stalwart resolution that even Jeeves would envy . . . and who does *artwork* too!) and Jude Wilson. And to my Net and non-Net readers, who keep insisting that I go pro and actually write for a living. Perhaps I will . . . .

If only there weren't so many more *Forever Knight* stories I could tell . . . .

Chapter 1

A Dream is a wish your heart makes, *When you're fast asleep*

Nick forced a smile to his lips as he entered the lab in the Coroner's Office. It took Natalie a few seconds to register his presence, as she was scrubbing up at the sink. When she *did* turn, the light in her eyes dimmed, and was almost instantly replaced by a suspicious look.

Taking the green hat off her head and shrugging out of the lab apron, she commanded, "Okay, spill it."

The shrug he managed was half-hearted as well. Inwardly, he cursed. He was better than this—he'd spent a good portion of the last eight hundred years masking his feelings, letting his face betray nothing to mortal or vampire alike. So why was today any different?

And under Natalie's relentless scrutiny, it wasn't worth the effort.

Nick managed a sigh and shrugged again. "We've had a rough couple of days."

Natalie's eyes clouded for a moment and she looked down at the clipboards arranged on a trolley in front of her. "The jumper?" she asked, after a moment's hesitation.

He shook his head slightly, then turned away, examining the tile, the ceiling . . . anything. "He wasn't a jumper. He went up the bungee tower on a dare. The ice got him at the top." Glancing at her, he nodded toward the clipboard. "Whatever that tells you, we've got witnesses to confirm. Although we won't be able to interview the kid who made the dare until he comes out of sedation."

"Geez. He couldn't have been more than sixteen."

"He was *stupid*." The anger that had been building in him finally escaped in the word. Nick took a swing at the trolley, but stopped himself in time. As it was, his hand grazed the edge of the cart, which sent the clipboards flying. Instantly, he dropped to a crouch and began to retrieve them. "I'm sorry," he muttered, handing two of the clipboards up to her and reaching for a third. "I've got no right to take this out on you—"

"That's true." Her hand covered his as he rose and handed her the last clipboard, stopping him in his tracks. "But you need to talk to someone. It's occupational hazard in our business. A waste of life is always tragic and it's going to affect us."

He forced his eyes away from hers, slipped his cold hand from the comforting grasp of Natalie's warm fingers, and turned away. "But some of *us* don't know what a tragedy it really is. To throw his life away—his mortality—on something so stupid—"

Natalie's hand touched his shoulder. "It's not your fault, so take off the hair shirt. He was a kid. He made a bad decision. Accidents happen. You didn't do anything stupid when you were young?"

"Yeah." He turned his head to meet her gaze, almost flinching again at the pity he found in her eyes. "But he won't come back, will he? For him, at least, it's over."

Her lips parted and she seemed ready to say something, but Natalie looked away. She lifted the clipboard in her hand and stared at it. He could almost hear her mind racing, trying to think of some words to comfort him, some retort to shock him back to himself. That was one of the reasons he'd come here at the end of shift, hoping she could shake him out of this mood.

The other was that she'd been away. And his self-pity was a great 'welcome home.'

Nick cleared his throat and walked across the tile floor of the lab, away from her. "How was the conference in New York?"

"Okay, I guess." There was relief in her tone, she was grateful that he'd changed the subject. "Just the same old stuff. There are only so many ways you can cut into a corpse. Although there's a new exploratory laser I'd like to get my hands on. And I borrowed the slides from a spectacular lecture on liver dissection, if you're interested."

His revulsion must have shown on his face when he turned, because she laughed. The sound helped to ease a little bit of the darkness that had settled over his soul. And he wondered, for a moment, whether the past few days of senseless death had so disturbed him *because* Natalie hadn't been there. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Natalie walked over to the desk and opened a drawer. "I think you'll want to take a look at this, though."

"You got it?" In his haste, he moved to her side too quickly for her to see. She started, but he placed a hand on her arm to steady her, the other hand lifting the small, white cardboard jewelry box from her palm.

"Uh, yeah." He could sense her eyes on him, but for a moment all he could do was look at the box. "That woman was strange."

"She lives in Greenwich Village."

"That's an explanation?"

"It used to be." He debated whether to open the box there or drop it into his pocket and leave, but Natalie's curious eyes told him that he wouldn't make it to the hallway without being tackled. He did owe her that much, after sending her on the mystery errand when she happened to be in New York.

A flick of his finger removed the lid. Inside was a small wicker doll; the eyes and mouth were painted dots, its clothing consisted of a piece of red and gold patterned cloth, and the hair was painted brown. It was no larger than his thumb. "Any instructions?"

He looked up, only to find Natalie staring at the doll in puzzlement. "Yeah," she managed, after meeting his eyes. "She said to keep it with you. That it would lead you to what your heart most desires."

"That's all?"

"Hey, isn't that weird enough?" Backing up a step, she shivered. "Spooky. You ever met her?"

Nick replaced the lid and closed his fingers over the box. "No. She was a . . . referral."

"I guessed as much." When Nick met her eyes, she smiled almost guiltily. "Well, she's gorgeous. She's got this black hair and almond eyes and this dress that—well, it's purple. She stood in the door of the shop and watched me leave. It must have been ten below and there wasn't a goose pimple anywhere on her—believe me, in that dress, I would have seen it." Her eyes narrowed. "She isn't . . . one of you, is she?"

"I don't think so." Caught off-guard by her question, he considered for a moment, then shook his head. "No."

Natalie sighed and it was only then that he realized she'd been holding her breath. "That's reassuring."

"Why?" Tucking the box in the pocket of his leather jacket, he seated himself on the edge of her desk. "What was wrong with her?"

"Her? Nothing. Half the people in Hollywood would give their souls to look like her, and the other half—" She shook her head, a taut smile appearing on her lips. "It's just that, well, I asked her to do a

card reading for me. And she *wouldn't*."

Nick raised an eyebrow in mock-horror. "*Dr.* Lambert! I *am* surprised."

Natalie tapped his shoulder with the back of her hand as she passed. "Well, she had cards sitting on a table. And her door said she was an 'advisor.' I thought it would be good for a laugh."

His hand went to the box in his pocket and his fingers closed around it again. He didn't much believe in the cards or the fortune-telling tricks of charlatans. Then again, there had been people he'd met who had seen and known things . . . . "Did she give you a reason?" he asked, with what he hoped was casual interest.

"She said I knew more than I should." Natalie's fingers closed over one of the clipboards and she carried it to a filing cabinet. "Then she showed me the door." She turned her head to look at him. "You don't think she knows what you—I mean—?"

"No," Nick said firmly. He rose to his feet and walked toward her. "There's no way she could know. I've had no direct contact with her, someone else made the arrangements."

"And you're willing to trust . . . that?" She inclined her head slightly, indicating the box in his pocket.

"I'm willing to *try* anything," he corrected. "Don't tell me the empirical Dr. Lambert is frightened of a little dream doll?"

"The empirical Dr. Lambert has seen a lot recently that would have sent other coroners into the loony bin," she reminded him. "It's just that—" she shivered and turned back to the filing cabinet, "—never mind. As usual, I came back just when the office was hip-deep in bodies. Typical."

"Well, at least things can't get much worse."

"Yeah." Closing the filing cabinet, she smiled at him, but the smile was forced. "See you tomorrow."

His answer was non-committal as he turned and left, his fingers again searching out the box in his pocket, his hand closing over the cardboard protectively. Yet, all the way home, it was Natalie's forced smile that stayed in his mind. And it took him the rest of the morning to identify the shadow that lurked behind her eyes as he'd left.

It was fear.

There was a red glare of pain from the back of his head. Nick opened his eyes to darkness, stunned for a moment that the black was nothing more than a blur of shapes and angry whispers. He should've been able to see everything clearly, but it was as if a black netting had been placed before his eyes.

"Here he is," said Janette's voice, in not much more than a whisper. "Nicky, are you all right?"

Strong hands supported him, helped him to his feet. He realized then, as he leaned against a wall, the cool plaster against the warmth of his forehead, that he'd been sprawled on the floor. "Where am—?"

"Blood?" Janette's voice was more than a little alarmed. "He's hurt—"

A scream rent the air—something inhuman and ear-splitting. A soft hand grasped his—Janette?—and he was dragged away from the brief comfort and support given by the wall. He stumbled and recovered, fear giving his feet more coordination than he would have thought possible, knowing that something was behind him, chasing him.

The solid black and deep grays gave way to bands of lighter gray as he moved forward. Janette—he could see her silhouette ahead of him—was dragging him through a battered hallway. He tripped on concrete steps going upward, but caught himself with his free hand. A door opened above him.

Light flooded through, blinding him.

Instinctively, his grasp on Janette's hand tightened—he pulled back and she pulled forward. "The light!" he croaked, his throat dry. "Janette—the light!"

Another hand reached down, the callused fingers grasping his forearm and hauling him upward into the blinding light, unceremoniously. Nick blinked in the brightness, unable to make out objects, or even shapes. He tottered on the sill of the steps, almost falling back into the darkness.

Then something hit him from behind, sending him sprawling on the ground. He twisted as he fell and something or someone fell on top of him. Talons clutched at his throat, trying to squeeze the breath from him. His sight was coming back, but all he could see was a pair of gold-red eyes and fangs caught in an inhuman snarl.

He grunted as that other body was pushed down against him. The eyes above him turned to a surprised brown and the mouth opened wider, in a scream. The thing began to struggle, lashing out at him.

Again, hands caught his, dragging him away. He saw that the thing—what was left of a woman wearing a beige sweater and skirt—was writhing in agony and howling, pinned to the asphalt by a broken piece of wooden fencing. She was burning as the waning light struck her, skin sizzling and charring.

Nick tried to move his arm across his eyes, so that he wouldn't see the agony that was already assaulting his ears. At that, the grip on his hands was gone and he fell, catching himself before he landed heavily on his left arm. As it was, he scraped it across the concrete. It stung, adding a harmonic note to the pounding at the back of his head.

"That was *stupid*, Nicholas, " said a familiar voice.

Leaning back his head, Nick saw the outlines of a silhouette against the sunlight. Work boots, khaki pants, sleeveless T-shirt, sweat running in dirty rivulets against skin—but it wasn't until he turned, that Nick matched the profile features to his memory. "LaCroix?" he whispered in horror, the word coming out little more than a croak.

Janette knelt beside him, propping him up against her shoulder, resting his weight against her. She, too, was in the sunlight. He stared at her in wonder, seeing her for the first time in centuries without makeup. Her garb was just as simple—a T-shirt and slacks, with lighter boots. Sweat was on her as well, causing her hands to slip as she tried to hold him. "I was right—he smacked his head when he hit the wall." She stared into his eyes. "Nicky—can you see me? Are you dizzy?"

LaCroix pulled a flask from the belt at his hip and threw it to Janette. "Give him that. Would serve him right if he's concussed himself."

"He pushed me out of the way!"

"You shouldn't have been *in* the way."

He heard her fumble with the flask cap, then felt the rim at his lips. Greedily, he drank the cool water, sucking it into his mouth and down his throat without a breath. He pushed her hand away from the flask and tipped it on end, then sputtered, spitting water as he choked.

"Easy," cautioned Janette, taking the flask from him. "You can have more in a bit. But we've got to get under cover."

"Will he be ready for his shift?"

Janette threw the flask back at LaCroix, hard. "Why do you bother asking? You'll send him, no matter what I say."

"It won't be me that decides whether he goes," answered LaCroix. He caught the flask easily and slid the strap back onto the belt at his waist. "It'll be him. He won't miss work for a split skull or anything

else." Glancing up and away, he added, "You're right about cover. I'd say we've a half hour until dark. And we can't send him off to work with that open head wound—they'll be on him like a pack of dogs."

Nick felt Janette's body shiver against him. He raised his hand to touch her chin, wanting to tell her that he'd protect her, that she'd be fine—but he didn't have the words. What was going on? His mind was crowded with a half dozen images, his senses seemed dull, his reflexes slow, his muscles unresponsive—

"Can you travel, now?" she asked, her eyes searching his.

This time he didn't try for words, settling for a nod. Then, with her help, he rose from the ground despite the protest of his muscles. At first it seemed that Janette would support him, but then LaCroix slipped an arm beneath his shoulder, taking some of the weight. "Scout it out for us," he told Janette, gesturing with his free hand. "It's too close to dark to take any chances we'll be caught by a patrol."

As they turned, Nick caught sight of the loose clothing that was blowing around the fence post stuck into the warm asphalt of the street. The ashes from the vampire were already beginning to blow away.

"Good work," said LaCroix, barely loud enough for him to hear. "Janette was right—you saved her life. That thing would have taken her head off if you hadn't distracted it. Next time, though, remember to duck, all right?"

Mumbling some feeble form of assent, Nick managed to keep pace with LaCroix, fighting to carry as much of his own weight as possible, despite the throbbing in his head and the steady burn of the scrape across his shoulder. The sun was low in the sky. It should have been the beginning of rush hour.

He stopped, startled, as he realized they were in the heart of the Toronto business district . . . and the streets were empty, except for the occasional speeding car, as some mortal raced the setting sun back to a place of safety. Earlier, there had been people on the streets, along with the daylight police patrols. But as the sun set, the street had emptied, preparing for the influx of the night people.

The office buildings were silent sentinels. He felt eyes watching them as they moved through the sunlit streets. They avoided the places of shadow or brief darkness. There was no sign of life—no sounds of traffic, or of crowds. Just the steady hum of machinery filled the air, the machinery that kept the interiors of the buildings cold and dark.

For *them*.

Nick was surprised at the vehemence of the thought, the bitter bile that rose at the back of his throat. He wanted to ask a hundred questions—a *thousand* questions—about where he was and how LaCroix was alive and how he and Janette, and LaCroix, for that matter, could stand in the sun.

But his throat was still dry and the back of his head pounded. He barely noticed when Janette appeared, waving an all clear about a block before disappearing around another corner. Forcing himself to concentrate helped, but the pounding in his skull grew louder and more insistent.

LaCroix tightened his grip on Nick's shoulder and whispered, "Just a half block more. You can do it. I've seen you do better. Then again, that was when you'd had one of them at your back, trying to rip out your throat. Just a bit more and then you'll rest."

LaCroix stretched the truth more than a little—it was at least three blocks before they darted down a side alley. Nick leaned his weight against the wall, while LaCroix knocked at the re-enforced metal door—a series of taps, in a sequence that seemed all too familiar and didn't help in easing the pounding in his skull. When the door opened inward, hesitantly, Nick took a step and started to fall, but LaCroix grabbed his arm, as did someone else who darted out the door. Between them, they dragged Nick inside, out of the fading sunlight.

It was cool, in the basement of the building, and dark. A few wan fluorescent lights shone here and

there, revealing faces of all ages and sexes that were vaguely familiar. Nick couldn't attach names to them, but feelings rushed through him; he knew that this child and that had been orphaned, this woman had run from a husband who had turned, while that man had been conscripted for 'blood work' and had fled here to escape his fate. Only one seemed entirely out of place—a woman dressed in violet silk, which was odd because the others wore jeans and shirts that had seen better days. Her almond eyes met his, then looked away, as he was helped to a place of safety.

It wasn't unlikely that they hadn't yet met. There were so many refugees here, in corridors and basement rooms, and other places. More arrived each day.

Many more.

Nick had enough of his strength to fight off his helpers, as they dropped him to a mattress. Sitting on the edge, his head in his hands, he closed his eyes and wondered why all of this seemed so strange . . . and yet so familiar. He dropped his hands from his face when a hand touched his arm—LaCroix.

Squatting beside the mattress, he eyed Nick suspiciously. "*Are* you well enough to go in?" he asked, in that ever-doubting voice.

Janette sat down beside Nick, a small medical kit in her hands. He looked away as she uncapped the antiseptic, knowing that both the head and arm wound would sting like crazy. Forcing himself to concentrate on LaCroix, he managed a smile. "I'll have to, won't I? If I don't show up for my shift, they'll check on me. And we don't want them looking at this place too—oww!—closely."

Janette grinned back as he swung his head around to look at her. Brandishing the antiseptic and the light bandage, she held her hands up in mock surrender. "Do you want to walk into work bleeding from a head wound, or not?"

"*Not*," he decided, after enough of a moment's pause to cause her grin to widen further. Then he looked back at LaCroix. "You've got something planned *tonight*? Today wasn't enough?"

"Nothing to concern you." Again, LaCroix looked away. "You know we have to get as many of them as we can before that artificial blood plant comes on-line. After that, we'll only be a nuisance to them. And you either hide nuisances . . . or you exterminate them."

"But surely they'll need us for . . . well, accidents *do* happen," Janette retorted, as LaCroix smiled at her sudden delicacy. "And they'll need to keep their population constant."

"They'll *try*. And you forget, dear Janette, that the hunt provides a certain amount of pleasure for them. They'll want to keep a few of us on hand for that. Not to mention flunkies for daylight activities."

Nick raised his hand and said, "Guilty," in a light tone, then paused in wonderment. Why on earth had he said that?

But LaCroix didn't seem to notice his lapse in memory. Nodding, he met Nick's eyes. "Yes, but for how long? You've been too good at what you do, Nick—that fact that they took you off day patrol and put you on night duty so quickly should tell you that much. Vampires in power have started to notice. I wouldn't be surprised if they offered to turn you. And soon."

There was a gasp from Janette. She looked away when they glanced at her, pretending to repack the medical kit. "You're fine. I put some sealant on it. It'll be tender, but they shouldn't notice anything out of the ordinary. Your shirt will hide the patch on your arm. A fall down the stairs will probably cover any questions."

Snapping the kit closed, she rose from the mattress, touched her fingers to her lips, then to Nick's forehead. "Be careful tonight."

He caught her hand. "Stay?" he asked, glancing at LaCroix.

But her eyes went to LaCroix, too. Then, she looked to the ground. "I don't think I want to hear what's going to be said," she answered, very softly. Her dark eyes met his again, this time filled with sadness and edged with fear. "Be *very* careful, Nicky. Walk in the light."

"I will," he answered, but she was already gone, the medical kit bumping against her hip as she ran out of the small room.

"She'd be devastated if anything happened to you," said LaCroix, as Nick's eyes followed her from the room. "But she'd survive. Out of all of us, I think she's the one most likely to make it through this—or turn at the first chance they give her."

"No," said Nick forcefully. "Janette would never turn—"

LaCroix said nothing and looked away. "Most of them would, if given a chance. Remember that, Nick. Remember that, when you're standing among your 'friends' on the force, trying to ignore their jokes about mortals, their hungry eyes and their hard stares. Remember that the people whose lives we guard can only be trusted so far—and no farther."

"Not all. There *are* some I'd trust with my life."

"Never trust *anyone* with your life," warned LaCroix, sharply. When he turned, his eyes seemed to have aged centuries. "*Anyone*."

"But Janette—and you—"

"Not Janette. And not me." LaCroix smiled, his lips drawing into a thin, grim line. "But for God's sake, don't trust any of *them*. They're predators, Nick. Remember that, too. And when they make you the offer—"

"They won't—"

"They *will*," insisted LaCroix, his eyes burning. "*When* they offer to turn you, think about it."

Nick looked down at the floor and shook his head. "You can't be ser—"

"*Think* about it." LaCroix rose to his feet, then gestured upward with his hand. "You'd better get washed and dressed. You'll be going on shift, soon."

They both looked up at a sound at the door. The girl was no older than eight, with brown hair pulled back by a headband. Her clothing was clean, though well worn—a Blue-Jays T-shirt and denim shorts. She had one hand on the doorjamb, as if she were going to run.

"Come in," said LaCroix, nodding toward her. He gestured toward Nick. "As you can see, he's fine."

A lopsided smile lit her face and she took a step into the room, her eyes glued to Nick. He noticed that she left a wide berth between herself and LaCroix. "I was worried. It's really late. Mom said they'd brought you in."

"I'm fine," repeated Nick. To prove it to her, he managed to rise from the mattress on the old bed frame without wincing, though a quick glance at LaCroix told him that he hadn't fooled everyone in the room.

But at least *she* smiled, shyly. Then her eyes grew dark and serious. "I wanted to know—you're gonna see Dad tonight, right?"

LaCroix sighed and took a step toward her, his hand raised to place on her shoulder. "Jenny, we've talked about this before—"

But Nick saw her flinch and wedged his way between them, placing his own hand on Jenny's shoulder. Meeting LaCroix's gaze, he nodded toward the door. "I'll see you when my shift's over."

"All right." LaCroix hesitated for a moment, glancing down at the girl, then turned on his heel and

stalked out, without another word.

Nick felt Jenny's shoulder relax beneath his hand. Gesturing toward the mattress, he said, "Have a seat."

She sat down, but her eyes moved to the door, then back to Nick. Shaking his head, Nick rubbed his chin with his hand. "Jenny, I understand why you're tough on LaCroix—"

"He wants my Daddy *dead*," she answered angrily. But when he met her eyes again, she looked away. Her hands were clasped tightly together in her lap and she dug at the cement floor with the toe of her sneaker. "You can't say he doesn't. It wasn't Daddy's fault. He didn't *want* to turn. Even *you* said so."

The eyes that fixed on his wanted comfort, reassurance. Seating himself beside her, Nick met that gaze evenly. "And I'll say it again. A lot of the police didn't want to turn, Jenny, your dad among them. But they'd passed the new laws. And with more and more vampires being made each day and more and more of us getting killed . . . somebody had to take the job. He wanted you and your mom to be safe."

"I know." Jenny looked down at her foot scraping the concrete. "Mom cries a lot. She tries to pretend she doesn't, but she misses him."

"At least you know where your Dad *is*. And that he still loves you and your mom. Some people aren't that lucky."

Her chin moved and he realized that her gaze had gone to the doorway. "Like him?"

"LaCroix?" Nick hesitated, but when her eyes sought his again, he nodded. "Yes, like LaCroix. His family, *all* of his family, were killed back in the first uprisings. That's why you're here, why *we're* here. He wanted to make sure that didn't happen to anyone else."

"And that's why they hurt him?"

Nick winced at her words, glad that her eyes weren't on him. How simple it sounded from a child's lips—the crushing of a concert musician's hand as punishment for hiding refugees had gone deeper than 'hurt.' They'd taken his wife, his child, his brother . . . even his music . . . but they hadn't killed him. And that had been their one mistake.

"That's why." Her eyes met his again and he wondered if she really understood. He and Jenny and Myra saw their situation in shades of gray—knowing, trusting, even loving those who had been turned. But they were outnumbered by LaCroix and those who had been all but destroyed by the vampires, in a hundred different ways. For them, it was a war, with the survivors being mortals *or* vampires. There could be *no* compromise.

And yet . . . LaCroix wanted him to consider being turned, if the offer was made.

"Will you tell Dad—tell him I love him? And that I'm okay. And Mom's okay."

"I will," he promised, mentally crossing his fingers.

Jenny frowned, seeming to sense his hesitancy. "Cross your heart?"

"And hope to die," he responded, crossing his chest with his finger, then holding it up in a pledge.

That seemed to satisfy her. She nodded, then grabbed his hand with her own. "I guess you'd better get going, huh?"

"If I'm gonna make it to work on time. Unlike your Dad."

Schanke's tardiness had been legendary when he was mortal because he was always stopping for a treat on the way to work. Now on perpetual night shift, his body had never quite adapted to the change and he *always* overslept. Just the mention of something that familiar brought a smile to Jenny's lips. Impulsively, she hugged him, then turned and ran from the room.

Nick sat a moment, then sighed and pressed his protesting muscles into action. He headed down the

corridor to the fire stairs. Cautiously making his way past the booby traps, he slipped down the rear service corridor, then took another set of stairs up to his apartment. With the sun going down, he had no fear the other tenants would be around. And if they were, he'd made a habit of being seen jogging before work.

He fitted the key in the lock and entered, glancing around to make certain nothing had been touched. The windows were blocked and boarded from the inside, but he didn't bother hitting the lights as he wandered through the living room, to the bedroom. As far as vampire surveillance would know, he'd been in all day. And no mortal in their right mind was going to contradict the story of a cop . . . even if that cop happened to be one of the few mortal day-patrol members on temporary night assignment.

The sight of the made bed and the scent of the clean cotton sheets brought a smile to his face—Myra's work, no doubt. She'd adopted him as her special project and no matter how much she grumbled about his bachelor habits or her own workload, she considered it a source of pride that he could always expect clean sheets and a clean apartment. He often thought it was one of the things that kept her from going completely over the edge. Schanke had been a lucky man—when he'd been mortal.

Nick walked to the bed and threw himself on it, planning to grab what few minutes sleep he could before he had to shower, shave, and dress for his second job—in the night world. But before his head could hit the pillow, the buzzer on the alarm clock on the bedside table decided to sound, the noise insistent enough to wake the—

Nick sat up in bed, the black silk sheets sliding from him. He stared wildly around at his surroundings, leaped to the floor, then knocked the clock off the table with one hand as he made his way to the bedroom door.

The buzzing stopped when the clock crashed to the floor, shattering into plastic and metal bits. Ignoring it, he threw open the bedroom door and walked out to the upper railing of the loft.

And it *was* the loft. Everything was exactly where he had placed it before he went to sleep last night—the shutters were drawn, the latch on the elevator access locked, no messages on the phone.

Wearily, he ran his hand across his eyes and yawned. He felt like he'd been hit by a truck. Whatever he'd dreamed last night, it hadn't left him at all rested—

That's when the memories flooded back, swirling around in his conscious mind like a sudden tsunami. He grabbed the railing for support, suddenly dizzy, then felt the top edge of it bend beneath his hand. Alarmed, he released the rail and backed into the wall—but that brought back the memory of waking in the dark, his head throbbing.

His hands at his temples, Nick stumbled back into the bedroom. Almost immediately, he spotted the dream doll sitting on the bedside table. He picked it up—

And the memories receded. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply, able to think clearly again. When he opened his eyes, the room was still the same. Numbly, he sat down on the bed, then stared at the small wicker doll in the palm of his hand.

One leg was bent upward, at an awkward angle, toward the chest. Gingerly, Nick tried to move the leg back down—he was certain it was straight when he had gone to sleep last night—but it wouldn't budge. After a few seconds, he gave up on the effort and put the doll to one side, afraid that he would break it. As soon as he showered, shaved, and dressed, it was going back in the box. A call to a delivery service would take it back to New York and out of his life, forever.

But events conspired against him. By the time he got out of the shower and was dressed, he was late. Nick hurried down the stairs, the doll in his hand, then saw the blinking light on his answering machine. Cursing under his breath, he checked the downstairs clock and realized just how late he was.

The recording was typical Schanke—"Hey, partner . . . if you're going to grace us with your presence this evening, don't even bother going into the shop. We've got a nasty call at fifteen-o-seven Westmore—sounds like a marital dispute gone bad. Looks like we've got clean-up on the operation, so see you there. And pick me up a couple of crullers and a cup of coffee on the way—"

Nick fast-forwarded the message, but that was his only call. "Fifteen-o-seven Westmore," he repeated, shoving the doll into his pocket and heading for the door.

Chapter 2

Doubting, Dreaming Dreams no mortal *Ever dared to Dream before.*

Not even bothering to peel off the frozen leather jacket, Nick fell into the chair behind his desk, leaned back, and covered his eyes with his hands. It had been a marital dispute gone bad, but no one had taken notice until a neighbor called in a report of gunshots. By then it had been too late.

Sighing, Nick pulled his chair up to the desk, opened a drawer, and removed the appropriate forms, fighting back the urge to act on the smell of blood that lingered in his nostrils.

"Still green?" asked Schanke. The hot cup of coffee in one hand and donut in the other left no suspicion as to where he'd been since returning from that call. He set the coffee down on the desk and shrugged out of his scarf and coat. "What you need, partner, is a cast-iron stomach. Like me."

"It's only cast-iron because you never stop eating."

"So, maybe you should start?" Schanke shoved the donut in his face.

The smell alone should have caused him to turn his head in disgust. He surprised himself by staring at it, just for a moment, before pushing it away with his hand. "No, thanks. And I don't need the Captain coming down on me because *my* reports are covered with powered sugar."

"Suit yourself." Schanke sank his teeth into the donut, then perched himself on the edge of the desk. He stared off into space thoughtfully as he chewed. "You know," he said, after the second swallow, "I don't think I've seen that much blood at a crime scene since . . . ."

"Last night?" offered Nick.

Schanke stared at him a minute, then nodded. "Yeah, you're right. That one was just as messy, huh? I guess that's what happens when brains go splat. You figure a twelve-gauge shotgun would—"

"Please!" Nick held up his hand and half-rose from his seat to meet Schanke on eye-level. "Just do me a favor, okay? Let's leave off the blood and guts business for now. I'd *like* to get some work done."

"Okay, okay," said Schanke. But as Nick returned his attention to his paperwork, he felt Schanke's eyes studying him.

Throwing down the pen, he looked up. "What?!"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you look like something the cat dragged in."

"There's a *right* way to take that comment?"

"No, I'm serious." Putting what remained of his donut down on his desk, Schanke reached out and touched Nick's forehead. "You got a fever or something?"

Nick slapped his hand away, remembering to use a lot less force than he could. "I'm fine. I didn't get much sleep today." He turned his shoulder to Schanke and covered his work with his arm, trying to shut out his partner's attention.

But Schanke didn't get the message. "You eaten since yesterday?"

"No. I haven't." Again, he threw the pen down on his desk. "I overslept. I ran out of my place and straight to the scene." Which was true, for what it was worth—although Schanke wouldn't have understood that all he needed was a half bottle of the cow's blood in his refrigerator. But even the thought of that

turned his stomach. He stared at Schanke. "Are you done? Can I get back to work?"

But there was no twinkle in Schanke's eye, or hint that he was joking. "You were the primary on that kid last night. That's it, isn't it?"

Damn the man, for the intuition he claimed he didn't have. He met his partner's even stare and tried to lie, tried to think of some quip, or joke, or comment that would change the subject. But he was having the same problem he'd had with Natalie—these people were beginning to know him too well. And he trusted and respected them too much to lie all the time. Nor did he want to.

Nick shifted in his chair and looked away. "It was a waste of a human life. It shouldn't have happened."

"Like the four car pile-up on Friday. Or the cash machine hold-up on Sunday. And now, tonight, some guy blows his old lady's head off after fifteen years of wedded bliss because she burns the chicken?"

Nick tried to fight the wan smile that came to his lips. How could he tell Schanke that he'd seen blood flow like a river from a battlefield, corpses stinking with plague and decay piled high in the streets, and sights that would make the carnage of the last few days seem less notable than the swatting of a fly on a mid-summer's evening? He should have been immune to a few more corpses, *had* been immune . . . but each and every death had been senseless.

Nick looked up at Schanke and met those all-too-mortal eyes. "Doesn't it *ever* get to you?" he asked.

"Me? Good-time Schanke?" But his partner's false smile and light tone disappeared almost as quickly as his own. "Yeah, it's called burnout. Occupational hazard. So I go home to my house, which has a mortgage the size of Lake Ontario. And then I kiss my wife, who's usually covered in cold cream, curlers in her hair, and muttering something about my life expectancy if I put my cold feet on hers. And then I kiss my sleeping daughter, who looks like an angel but probably has a book report due tomorrow that she's going to need help on five minutes before the school bus comes. And then I think what a lucky son-of-a-gun I am. And it stops getting to me."

Not for the first time, he envied Schanke that self-satisfied smile, even with the mortgage, cold-cream, and five minute version of the latest best-seller to hit the third grade. "And that's the answer?"

"It's the answer for *me*." Schanke eyed him thoughtfully, then snapped his fingers and reached into his suit pocket. "And speaking of answers—there was a phone message for you at the front desk. It's from Natalie."

Nick reached up his hand, expecting Schanke to give him the message. But Schanke unfolded the pink paper and glanced at it. "Speaking of whom—"

"Schanke—" he warned softly.

"What is it between you guys? You're not getting any younger, you know."

Nick snapped his fingers, his hand still outsretched, hoping his glare would suffice as sufficient warning that his patience was wearing thin.

"And Natalie isn't either. Not that she doesn't look good, cause she does. And if you ever tell her that I said—"

Springing up, he grabbed the note from Schanke's fingers and returned to his desk.

"You're welcome." With a taut smile, Schanke sat down behind his own desk, his overcoat and scarf tossed to one side.

The message was brief—nothing more than a notation that she'd called. Crumbling it up in his fist, Nick tossed it into the trash with a frown. His hand hovered over the phone for a moment, but realizing Schanke was watching his every move, he abandoned the idea of returning the call. She was just checking up on him, no doubt. And after the business in the lab last night . . . why *was* this getting to him? He'd

seen—and *caused*, if he was being truthful—more horrible deaths in his eight hundred years than he'd seen in the last few days.

Maybe Schanke was right. Maybe it was cumulative—too much too soon and all on his watch. The couple tonight had been the capper.

Nick stared at the paperwork, but it wasn't making sense. The numbers and words were running together and he was having difficulty reading his own fairly-legible handwriting. Sitting back in his chair, he closed his eyes and yawned. Just a few seconds rest . . . that was all he needed. A few minutes of shut-eye and he'd be fine . . .

"Yo, partner! The days are for *sleeping*, the nights are for *working*."

Nick forced one of his eyes open as he leaned back in his chair, then closed it again as Schanke came into view. "Just resting my eyes."

"Yeah. And maybe that's *all* you're resting during the day. Bet that little number—what was her name? Janet?—bet she makes the mercury soar, huh?"

"Janette," he corrected absently. Then his eyes flew open and Nick sat up in his chair, staring at Schanke. "What?"

"Just wondering if you know she did wonders for your reputation. Nicest neck we've seen around here in a long time."

Schanke was referring to one of the attempts of the new regime to acclimatize the mortals to vampire-mortal co-rule—open house at the station. LaCroix had forced him to take Janette, so she'd know the layout, too. As it was, they'd been among the few mortals who'd actually shown up. Janette had charmed the vampire officers, but he'd kept her close to his side the entire time, holding her hand when her trembling fingers belied the seductive smiles she passed around the squad room.

Nick pulled his chair closer to the desk, nearly knocking over his cup of coffee. He picked it up and took a sip, trying to come up with some sort of answer—then nearly choked when he realized what he was doing.

But the coffee went down easily enough. And the taste . . . he'd never really tasted coffee before, not with mortal senses. A little sugar took the bitter edge off it.

"So, I was thinking, if your girl liked night life—"

"And Myra would take out your eyes if she got wind of it," he quipped. Then he looked away quickly, realizing what he'd said. "I'm sorry. I didn't get a lot of sleep this afternoon—"

"It's okay," said Schanke. His tone subdued, he seated himself at his desk. "It's not like we're still legally married, right? Till death do us part? And since I've got the paper to prove it—"

Nick glanced up, hearing the hidden anguish in the words. "Schanke—"

"It's so quiet there, without them," he said, so softly that Nick almost couldn't hear him. His partner's eyes focused elsewhere, lost in thought, moving from the boarded windows to the water cooler, and back again. "Jenny was always making some sort of noise or her music was on too loud—really awful stuff, too. And Myra and I never could agree what to watch on the tube—she always wanted to watch those American mini-series and I'd have to fight for the game, usually lose. She left most of her make-up, you know. I was going through it last night. I found her diet pills. Myra's always had a thing about her weight. But, now I'm thinking I've got the solution—"

"Schanke, don't do this to yourself—"

"Because if she went on a permanent liquid diet . . . *and* she'd be young forever. No facelifts or anything." His eyes moved back to Nick, the moisture at the corners blood red. "Have you see them? Spoken with them?"

Nick swallowed the lump that rose to the back of his throat. Schanke couldn't know that he saw Myra and Jenny on a daily basis. If he knew where they were, there'd be too much temptation to try to see them. And then, the inevitable would happen, as had happened to so many families when one member was turned . . . blood would be shed. He'd heard from Myra how they'd talked before Schanke had been turned. Jenny was definitely too young to be condemned to an eternity of physical childhood and Myra feared the loss of the light. But they'd tried to live together as a family just after Schanke had turned. It had lasted a week before she'd taken Jenny and the clothes on their back, never to return.

And now he was faced with his partner, a man who'd been forced to choose between the law and his family, who'd chosen to uphold his oath to protect and to serve even if it meant the loss of his wife and daughter.

"At least, tell me that they're *safe*. I know you hear stuff."

"Yeah." Nick nodded slightly. "I've heard that much. And there was a message passed on from Jenny—she loves you and she wants you to be careful."

"Thank you." Schanke turned away, pretending to rub something from his eye as he wiped away the bloody tear. "That helps, a little." Then, he clapped his hands together and buttoned his suit jacket, oblivious to the heat inside the station. "We'd better roll, partner. The night's not getting any younger. And we've got reports of four more attacks on vampires to check into."

Inwardly, Nick groaned. The rising temperatures during the abnormally hot summer were leading to more frequent and violent vampire/mortal confrontations. His shirt was plastered to his back and the makeup Janette had used to cover the abrasion on his head was starting to itch. Still, duty called. He struggled up from his chair and reached over to snag his suit jacket from the rack.

"Come on—" needled Schanke. "It hasn't even topped ninety yet."

"Yeah, like you'd feel it."

"Knight? Schanke?" It was Stonetree, down to shirtsleeves himself but, like Schanke, looking none the worse for it. He stood in the doorway to his office and gestured for them to join him.

"We were just heading out," explained Nick, slipping on his jacket. He glanced at Schanke and his partner met his gaze with a shrug. They'd both been late in getting in and this had all the potential of a classic dressing-down that neither of them needed.

Stonetree's eyes widened slightly, but his grim expression never changed. "My office. Now," he commanded, stepping back, waiting just inside the door.

"I think the thermometer just went up a couple of notches," noted Schanke.

Nick smirked and gestured for his partner to enter first. "This heat's gonna affect you just as much as it affects me." Not being suicidal, he dropped the smirk after Stonetree closed the door behind them. "What's up, Captain?"

"If it's about us showing up late for shift, I can explain—"

Stonetree raised his hand, cutting off the detective quickly. "Schanke—we'll deal with that later. Now, Knight, I can understand. You look like hell, Knight. What's the problem, can't get used to the day/night shift change? It's *been* six months."

Nick shook his head. "Just a lack of sleep. Maybe I'm not all that nocturnal."

"Well, maybe you'd better start thinking about getting used to it—on a full-time basis." Stonetree

picked up a page from his desk and handed it across to Nick. "Your papers came in—the brass okayed the promotion. Congratulations."

Something cold and hard fell into his stomach as he accepted the papers from Stonetree, and Nick was pretty certain that it was his heart. LaCroix *had* been right—how the hell had he known? The form was straight-forward, a promotion. But with it came a change of lifestyle. Or, rather, deathstyle.

Schanke clapped him on the shoulder. "Way to go, partner! I don't think anyone's *ever* been brought across without being on shift twelve months."

"Eighteen," corrected Stonetree. "But it's deserved. Sit down, Nick. Take five."

"Thanks." He all but fell back into the chair, still staring at the paper. Forcing a smile, Nick looked up at Stonetree and Schanke. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll take care of it this weekend, so I'll have you back by the end of the month." Stonetree glared at Schanke. "Anything on Knight's roster that you can't handle?"

"Contrary to popular opinion—no," said Schanke sharply. But when Nick glanced up, he smiled and nodded. "Wonder boy, there, wraps up his cases so neat, all I'd have to do is tie the bows and address them upstairs." Then he tapped Nick on the shoulder again. "And who's the lucky lady, huh? Bet there's a line of them waiting to sink their teeth into you, buddy."

Stonetree cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact—" He passed another sheet of paper to Nick, "Somehow, word got around before the official memo came down—I think the secretarial pool had something to do with it. There's a list of sponsors."

"Each and every one a volunteer, I don't doubt." Schanke craned his head to see the list, but Nick took it quickly from the Captain's hand and folded it, without even glancing at the names. "And I wonder if a certain coroner's name might be on top?"

"Can it, Schanke," said Stonetree. "Give the guy some air." His eyes narrowed and the ghost of a smile flitted across his face. "Let me guess, Knight—you were the only one in this building who didn't see this coming?"

Nick nodded and swallowed again. Hard. "Guess I'm out of the loop," he muttered, in way of explanation. "Captain, I—how long do I have to decide?"

"Decide?" Stonetree stared at him. "Nick, it's not optional. Yes, the brass like your style and they want you on board as fast as possible, but they don't give second chances, even to up-and-comers. If you turn this down, they won't drop you back to day shift. You'll be off the force. And there's no way you'd get another offer to turn legally."

"I know." He stared down at the paper, the legalese hiding the horror of what he was being ordered to do. "It's just that . . . I need to think about it. I've seen—" he looked at Schanke "—I've seen what happens."

For a moment their eyes met, then Schanke looked away. Nick turned his attention to Stonetree, who nodded. "Yeah," he said softly, "but you don't have any family. That's one of the reasons the brass put you on the fast track." Stonetree sat down behind his desk. Reaching into his pocket, his withdrew his badge and threw it onto the desk top. "We all know what we said when they handed us one of those—to protect and serve. The law is the law. It doesn't matter if they're vampire or mortal, our job is still that—protect and serve. We're one of the few things standing between day-in/day-out business-as-usual and blood in the streets. The way things are going, this isn't going to change in the near future. Now we got two types of predators on the streets. And we're going to need the best people we can get to keep the status quo. Nick, you're a good man. *And* a good cop. We need both."

"I appreciate the confidence," said Nick. "But I've got reservations—*especially* about the status quo. If 'justice' becomes 'just us,' I want to be able to walk away. And this would make it a damn sight harder to do that. Maybe even make it impossible."

"I respect that. And I'd be sorry to lose you, if that's your choice. But it's your decision." Stonetree gestured toward the paper. "That's dated tomorrow. The brass won't expect your answer until the day after."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." He turned to Schanke. "Aren't we on call?"

"Protect and serve," answered Schanke lightly. His hand on the doorknob, he called, "See you later, Cap—"

"Just a minute." Stonetree rose from behind his desk and walked around it. "You—" he pointed at Nick, "I'm finished with. Out. But you—" he glared at Schanke "—I think something was said about coming in late for shift?"

"See you later, partner," whispered Nick in Schanke's ear, as he slipped out the door. He closed it behind him and headed for his desk, his pleasure at one-upping Schanke dissipating almost instantly. The paper in his hand felt like a lead weight.

A tap on his shoulder startled him and he whirled, just as a voice said, "What's a girl gotta do to get arrested around here?"

Despite the heat, something in his soul froze. No mortal could move that quickly. And if the voice belonged to Natalie—

It did. And she *was*.

Her eyes were just as bright and her smile as charming, although her teeth gleamed like mother of pearl. Dressed in a stylish tweed suit, she had a self-presence that he'd never remembered seeing in her as a mortal. She cocked an eyebrow at him, as if expecting an answer.

Nick turned his back to her and continued on toward the desk. "You might try dressing like a hooker."

"Now is that any way to talk to your sponsor?"

He froze again, hands on the back of his chair. There had been a lightness in her tone, but then she was suddenly beside him, a hand on his shoulder, apology in her voice. "Nick, I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have mentioned anything. And I assumed you . . . you *do* know, don't you?"

Placing the paper flat on the desk, he ran his hand down it to smooth it out. "Stonetree just told me." He dared to meet her eyes, then handed her the other list. "And gave me this."

"Typical, me showing up and putting my foot in it." Natalie unfolded the other sheet of paper as she spoke, glancing down at it. "I *am* sorry, Nick. I wouldn't have said anything but—that *cow*! And . . . the name of every woman in the *station* must be on here."

For a long moment, he only half-listened to her comments about the various names on the list, contenting himself to watching her. In a way, it agreed with her. She radiated a confidence that charmed as well as impressed. The best of her features had been highlighted, especially her eyes. They seemed darker even than the night. That was the way it worked—transforming the prey into the predator by making the plumage brighter, the lure more difficult to resist.

But there was also something harder, sharper about her. Some of the softness that he'd so treasured in her manner and her smile had disappeared along with the light.

Winding down, she tossed the list back at him. "I hope you're not serious about interviewing everyone on that list."

"I'm not interviewing *anyone*." Her smile disappeared when he added, "I'm not taking it."

He didn't think it possible, but those dark eyes grew darker. Catching his arm, she steered him into a corner. "Nick, are you *crazy*? Do you know what that would mean? To your career? To your *life*?"

"That's the choice, isn't it—life or death?" He flicked his wrist back toward his desk. "Well, I'm choosing life."

Her hand dropped from his arm and she took a step back, biting her lip lightly in a gesture so familiar it tugged at the memory in his heart. "Look, if it's me, if I came on too strong just now . . . I'm sorry. I was just so—I didn't think it would happen this soon. And I thought that you felt the way I—I was wrong."

Nick reached forward to touch her cheek with his hand. Her eyes met his, hesitant and fearful. "Nat . . . you *weren't* wrong. It's just that—this is a decision *I* have to make."

Her hand covered his. "It's not that bad," she whispered, taking a step closer to him, all but in his arms. "Nick, you know I'd never hurt you. And after . . . we'd take care of each other, forever. It's the only way we *can* be together."

After carefully dancing along the various boundaries for six months—co-workers, public servants, friends—it was the one dance they'd never tried, the one boundary they'd never crossed. It was just too dangerous—they'd both agreed. And even if he'd had the inclination to let her turn him, which he hadn't, it would have been unsanctioned and illegal.

But that was no longer the case. He couldn't hide behind *that* excuse any longer. And he wasn't certain he could make her understand why he couldn't accept her offer.

"Daisies," he answered.

Natalie stared at him. "Excuse me?"

Extricating himself from her arms, which had somehow tangled themselves around his shoulders and drawn him into range of her perfume and eyes—both equally intoxicating—he held her at arm's length. "Daisies," he repeated. "You said you regretted that you'd never see the flowers in your mother's garden again. Especially the daisies, the way their pedals open and move when the sun touches them."

She blinked and looked down at the floor. He took her hands and moved closer to her, whispering in her ear. "How can you ask me to become what you've become, when you regret it? Every hour of every night, you regret being turned. And you want to find a way back."

Natalie straightened and shifted, as if to move away from him, but he slipped his arms around her throat, standing behind her and holding her close. The lines of her neck were tight. He had a feeling she was trying not to cry. "And you're asking me to do this, to make the same mistake, so we can be unhappy *together*?"

She cleared her throat. "Nick, I'll never understand how someone so sensitive can be so cruel."

Releasing her, he stepped back. "I'm only telling you the truth."

"That's what I mean." She turned toward him. "You use it like a sword, hack and slash away anything that isn't real, that isn't honest. You can't even leave dreams alone."

"I've had a good teacher," he said, chalking up yet another thing he owed LaCroix.

"But dreams feed hope. And we can't live without hope." Natalie looked away. "At least, *I* can't. That's why I'm looking for a cure. There's got to be a way back."

"And when you come back, I'll be waiting."

The hardness returned to her eyes as she looked at him. "*Will* you?" Then, frowning sadly, she dropped her gaze to the floor. "I don't think you'll live that long."

At that, Schanke ran over. Leaning his hands on the desk, he said, "Time to roll, partner. A bomb just went off at the DayClub." He leered at Natalie. "*Nice* suit, Dr. Lambert. So, you set a date with my

partner? Watch him—I heard he bites."

"Drop dead, Schanke," she snarled, stalking away. "*Again*!"

"Hey, who put the garlic under her saddle?" asked Schanke, bewildered. Then he looked at Nick and smiled. "You didn't tell her that you'd chosen one of the ladies from the list, did you?"

"What she said," answered Nick, slipping into his suit coat and heading for the door. "Ditto."

But Schanke trailed after him. "About that list? If you don't want it, I'd sort of like to have a copy—"

The ride out to the club proved to be a nightmare—most of the traffic congestion now occurred between sunset and sunrise, which made getting around Toronto nearly impossible, especially in the summer. Nick let Schanke drive, closed his eyes, and hoped that the vampire's reflexes would get them through most of the squealing breaks and blaring horns intact.

It was when they arrived at their destination that he got the strangest feeling of *deja vu*—he knew this club, knew it well, but the name hadn't been The DayClub. He stared at the facade of the brick building, surrounded by empty warehouses and apartment buildings, and wondered why it seemed so familiar.

But he had only a moment or so to even think about it. They were only the third car at the scene—thanks to Schanke's disregard for the laws of the traffic, the city, and physics—and the impact of the explosion had yet to be hidden by white sheets and police barricades.

The building was a burned-out shell. Body parts were strewn along the street. From the looks of the place, the club had been crowded to capacity when the bomb had detonated. If the site had been just four or five blocks north, the street casualties alone would have been phenomenal.

That's when the smell of blood hit. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, Nick covered his mouth and nose, walking among the things that had been vampires and which were quickly turning to piles of ash. Few of the bodies were intact. But of the ones that were—

He stopped, staring down at the corpse of a young blond woman. Part of her arm was missing, and a foot, but what had stopped him was the stake protruding from her chest and that her head had been ruthlessly severed. It was a miracle she hadn't disintegrated. "Schanke!" he yelled.

His partner was at his side before he could blink. The vampire took one look at the victim, then turned his head away. "Oh . . . geez. It's a hit. I bet there's more of 'em, too."

Nick simply stared, watching the corpse as it disintegrated before his eyes. "We need cameras," he said flatly. "Before the rest of them go. Natalie can't get a clue on the weapons unless she's got something—"

Schanke clapped him on the back and turned to the uniformed officers arriving. "Film," he called to them. "Take pictures of every intact corpse. Nothing fancy, just every shot you can get before they melt."

Melt. Nick started at the term—it was what they used to describe what was happening before his eyes, bodies turning to ash. It made gathering evidence for a homicide damn near impossible. Then again, how many causes of death could there be for a vampire, other than a stake and decapitation, maybe fire? Weapons were what caught suspects, now. Weapons . . . and a relaxation of evidentiary procedure. It was becoming easier to convict suspects, especially if the suspect was mortal and the victim had been a vampire.

Glancing around the site, the handkerchief still over his mouth, he saw what the blood did to them—how their eyes glowed red and gold and green, and their fangs extended. It was like taunting a hungry dog with meat. But *they* were always hungry, whether or not they'd just gorged themselves on their government allotment of human or animal blood. It was the perfect illustration of what LaCroix had said

again and again—it was us or them.

And he might have believed that, had one of *them* not been Schanke . . . his partner.

Nick had wandered to the far side of the site, letting the blues handle the remains of the corpses. He looked over the scene with a dispassionate eye, trying not to smell the iron tang of the drying blood. The bomb squad would handle the questions as to the type, power, and placement of the bomb. His job, at the moment, was to make guesses—who in the crowd of gawkers might be a suspect, where had the bomb come from, where might the suspect have run . . . .

Footsteps echoed down the alley beside the remains of the club. Drawing his gun, the bullets the new mixture of wood shrapnel and metal—a necessity in a world of nearly unstoppable near-immortals—he flattened himself against the wall, then peered down the dark alley. The footsteps had stopped. In the darkness he could see a flash of pale skin and frightened eyes before the sounds started again. "Freeze! Police!" he called, flattening himself against the wall, in case the suspect fired.

There was no response. Nick stepped out from cover and inched his way down the alley wall. Between the tension and the heat, his shirt was soaked through with perspiration, his hands slippery with sweat. But the grip of the gun was firm in his hand. This, at least, hadn't changed.

He nearly jumped when he realized Schanke was beside him, but kept his back against the wall. Only his heart betrayed him, skipping a beat.

"I heard you call," whispered Schanke. "What's up?"

"One suspect. Male. Teens to early twenties. Caucasian. Mortal." Nick kept his eyes trained on the depths of the alley, knowing that Schanke was doing the same. "I don't think he's armed. Could have come out to see what the fuss was about."

"Or . . . he could be the bomber."

There was a clang in the dark air of the alley. Before Nick could say 'fire escape,' Schanke had taken to the air, flying into a darkness in which he could see as well as Nick could see in daylight. Quickly, Nick moved down the alley, his back to the wall, looking upward. He spotted them just as the moon came out from behind a cloud, the youth screaming as the vampire descended upon him from the air.

Schanke grabbed the fire escape and swung himself onto the suspect. Shouting, "Freeze!" he flipped the suspect onto his stomach. But, instead of taking the cuffs from his pocket, he reared back. His fangs descended, glinting in the moonlight. From where he stood, Nick could see the ruby-red of his eyes. With blood all around him, Schanke had gone too far over the edge.

"Schanke! No!" cried Nick. He had one hand on the lower rung of the fire escape, and one foot on a bar, when there was a scream from the mouth of the alley. Even with the moonlight, it was only a small silhouette. And it took off at a run.

Dropping to the ground, Nick glanced up, to see that Schanke had come back to himself—he was pulling the cuffs from his belt. There was no time for explanations or recriminations. "I'll get it," Nick called, waving toward Schanke, then turning and heading up the alley.

At the mouth of the alley, Nick stopped again, flattening himself against the stone wall, this time on the side opposite the club. He peered around cautiously, but there was no sign of a suspect. Behind him, he could hear the occasional wail of a siren, the sounds of the uniformed officers and other detectives as they went over the scene with a fine-toothed comb. He glanced over his shoulder, now certain that only he had seen the other suspect. And after the little problem he'd just had with Schanke, he figured he'd be better off on his own.

The building beside the club was an abandoned apartment house. The door was boarded, but part of

the boards had been pulled away, leaving enough room to fit through. Nick hesitated only a moment before slipping inside—a tight fit for him, but probably not so hard for the smaller shadow he'd seen at the alley mouth.

He waited just inside the opening, letting his eyes adjust to the moonlight that filtered through broken glass windows and spaces between the boards on the doorway. A stairway went upward to his right, twisting the length of the room, perhaps as high as five or six stories. It was an awful lot to search on a hunch.

A light shower of dust down the open center of the stairway turned silver in the moonlight, accompanied by the creak of old wood. He moved just to one side of that center section and looked up, seeing a shadow against the wall. There *was* someone up there.

Procedure required that he cordon off the building and get help. Procedure, however, didn't take into account some thirty to forty uniformed vampires with bloodlust in their hearts and the law behind them. Daring to err on the side of humanity, Nick started up the steps, his back to the wall. He took the steps a few at a time, stopping to listen every so often. Shaking his head, he tapped his ear with his hand, wondering why his hearing was off—he should be able to hear the slightest whisper. But then . . . why would he? He was a mortal, not a vampire.

The second floor was clear, as was the third and fourth. It was when he reached the fifth floor—the highest level—that he saw the disturbance in the dust on the handrail and the footprints to a closed door. Slowly, Nick approached the door. He stood to the far side, gun held to his chest. "Police!" he shouted. "Open up!"

When the door didn't open, he slammed his shoulder against it, jumped back and flattened himself against the wall, waiting for a hail of bullets . . . *any* resistance.

Nothing.

He counted to ten, then ran into the room, gun held out and ready to fire. Swinging in an arc, he'd covered most of the room by the time he reached the center of the floor. There was a figure huddled against the wall just inside the door—a child. She was sobbing, quietly, fist in her mouth to muffle the sound.

Holstering his gun, Nick approached. "It's all right," he whispered. "I won't hurt you—" Then he froze, as the moon again pulled itself from behind a cloud and the light shone through the broken windows, into the empty room. "Jenny?"

Her eyes were wide and for a moment, he thought she'd gone blind, she hadn't responded to him. Then, as she stared at him, she seemed to realize who he was. Taking a deep breath, she whispered, "I saw my Daddy. I *saw* him!"

Nick knew exactly what she'd seen—Schanke, fangs bared and eyes red, ready to sink his fangs into the suspect's throat. He reached out, rubbing the skin on her upper arm. "Jenny, honey—that wasn't—"

"I saw my Daddy," she repeated, still staring with blank eyes. "I *saw* him." A sob broke through and her tears started again, leaving wet trails in the grime on her face. She threw herself into his arms. "Oh, Nick," she cried, between sobs, "I *saw* him."

Nick held her tightly, uncertain of what to do or say other than make comforting noises to quiet her. How could he help her reconcile the monster she'd just seen with the man who'd read her stories, told her to turn down her record player, and tucked her in at night? How could anyone?

That could wait. He had to get her out of here, away from the crime scene. "Jenny, what are you doing

here? You should be in bed."

She pulled her face away from his collar, enough to meet his eyes. The mild scolding got through to her. "I talked to LaCroix. He told me if I came here with him, I'd see Daddy."

Inwardly, Nick railed at the outright arrogance of his friend. LaCroix'd planned to use Jenny against her father, hoping Schanke would find her. They'd have words about this when he returned to the apartment come dawn. It wasn't the first time LaCroix had used one of them as pawns.

"Nick?" Jenny frowned, then shivered in his grasp. "I *did* see him, Nick. He was a *monster*. He—"

"Nick? You in here?"

He froze as he recognized Schanke's voice in the lower hall, then looked around quickly. There was no place to hide from heightened vampire senses. And, after the conversation he'd had with Schanke, he didn't dare let the vampire see his daughter. Only disaster could come of that.

Holding Jenny close, he whispered, "Do exactly what I say. Don't make a sound. All right?" He looked down and saw understanding in her terrified eyes. She'd recognized Schanke's voice as well.

Rising to his feet, Nick almost lifted Jenny from the floor, setting her on her feet. He hurried to the doorway and positioned Jenny with her back against the wall, just to his left and hidden from view. Placing his hand on her shoulder, he willed her to stay calm and quiet, hoping that keeping her that close would help mask their two heartbeats—with luck, Schanke would only pick up one.

"Nick?" came the call again.

"Here," he answered, standing in the doorway.

Schanke appeared at the center of the stairwell, rising straight up in the air. He hovered there, just above the level of the fifth floor railing. "You found anything?"

"No. Nothing." He tightened his grip on Jenny's shoulder, feeling her shudder beneath his fingers. "You?"

"Just the one outside. The blues are taking him in." Schanke met his gaze across the distance—Nick felt like his soul was being inspected.

"Should you be doing that?" asked Nick, gesturing toward the hovering Schanke with his free hand. "You gotta last the night, after all."

"Yeah." Schanke smiled wanly and settled on the upper landing, not more than ten yards from him. "You're right. It's gonna be a long night." His eyes narrowed as Jenny made a small sound. "You sure there's nothing—?"

Nick forced himself not to look at Jenny, prayed that his voice could keep from cracking. "Nothing," he repeated. "Trust me."

Schanke's eyes never moved from his. "Trust you. Yeah. Okay." Nodding slightly, he turned, facing the staircase. "You coming?"

"Back to *that*?"

He hadn't bothered to mask his feelings for the slaughter. Schanke laughed lightly. "I forgot—my partner's squeamish. Captain finds out, he's gonna think twice about giving you papers to turn."

Jenny shifted beneath his hand, but Nick held her in place. "Yeah," he said, in what he hoped was a sheepish tone. "If you want the truth—I couldn't handle it down there. I was pretty green earlier and—" he shrugged.

"I'll cover for you," promised Schanke. "That's what partners are supposed to do, right? Cover for each other?"

Nick nodded, knowing that Schanke was referring to the suspect who'd nearly gotten his neck ripped

out. "That's right . . . partner."

He waited one heartbeat, then two, then ten, unltil Schanke's footsteps were gone, before he knelt down beside Jenny. She's shoved her fist in her mouth, as if afraid to make a sound. Eyes wide, she stared at him.

"It's okay now," he said softly.

She placed her hands on his shoulders. "You can't be one of them, Nick. I saw Daddy. They'll make you a monster."

"I'm not going to turn," he promised. Carefully, he removed her hands from his shoulders, holding them in his own. "You have to listen to me. Stay here until dawn. Hide in the closet if you have to, but stay here until you can see the sun. Then go straight home. When you get there, you find LaCroix. And you tell him I want to see him as soon as I come back."

Jenny stared at him. He shook her, lightly, and her eyes focused on him again, but this time with some understanding. "I'm not going to turn," he repeated. "And I need you to deliver that message for me. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she answered, in a small voice.

Nick slipped out of his sweat-stained suit coat and placed it around her shoulders. "Now, go," he told her. "Hide in a closet. There's an empty one over there. And don't come out until the sun comes up."

Jenny hesitated, one hand on his shoulder. "You won't turn?"

"No."

"Promise?"

"Promise," he repeated, crossing his heart with a quick sketch of his fingers.

She hugged him tightly, a shy smile on her lips, which he matched with a grin. Glancing back at him, she ran to the closet, stepped inside, then peered out.

"Not a peep," he told her, rising to his feet. "And you give that message to LaCroix. I'm counting on you."

"I can do it," she promised.

"Good." He closed his eyes for a moment, wishing that he could stay, or find some other way to get her out of there. Had it been any other mortal child, there wouldn't have been a problem, but with Schanke here . . . .

Sighing, Nick opened his eyes and walked out into the hallway, then down the stairs. Outside, he found Schanke and more uniformed officers. "This one's clean," he told them," gesturing toward the building behind him. "You'll want to concentrate on anything with a fire escape or door on that alley or the one behind."

"You heard the man," said Schanke, making a shooing motion with his hands.

The vampire police officers hesitated, glancing at one another and muttering among themselves, then moved off to search the buildings. Nick looked down at the ground, knowing how much authority he had with them—practically none. And now that word was getting out that he'd been offered a chance to turn after six months . . . it was going to be a rough couple of days, which would only get rougher when he announced that he had no intention of giving up his life for the law.

"You *still* look green," commented Schanke. Clapping him on the shoulder, he gestured toward his car. "Why don't you take the rattletrap back to the station? I'll stay here and log bodies for a while."

Nick looked over his shoulder, at the uniformed personnel who'd just left them. "Schanke, I gotta pull my weight—"

"You can pull it better when you've got vampire strength." When he met Schanke's eyes, his partner smiled. "Go. Stonetree'll take one look at you and send you home."

"But your car—?"

"I'll fly." Schanke flipped the keys into the air. "We cover each other, okay?"

Catching the keys, Nick nodded. "Okay." He started toward the car, then turned. "About your insurance—?"

Schanke waved at him. "Paid. At least—I think I paid it last month."

Smiling, Nick headed toward the car at a run. He opened the door, then paused before he got in, his eyes going to the building where Jenny was hiding. He didn't doubt the uniforms would ignore it, now that Schanke had given it the okay. Maybe heading home, via a quick stop at the station to log out sick, *was* the best idea.

Yawning, he slipped the keys into the ignition. All he had to do was get Schanke's car through the worst of the night's traffic, and try not to fall asleep at his desk while he filled out his sick slip. Then again, a quick nap at his desk might help him make it back to the apartment without falling asleep at the wheel. And who would notice? Schanke seemed to spend half of his desk time with his eyes closed and his mouth open . . . .

Nick sat upright in his chair and rubbed his eyes. Schanke smiled across the desk at him. "Hello, there, sleeping beauty!"

Almost falling from his chair, he grabbed the edge of the desk like a drowning man grabbing a life preserver and stared around wildly. There were no boards on the windows. The room, and the people in it, were all too normally human. And Schanke was sipping at his coffee with a self-satified smile. It had been a dream.

Another dream. It had seemed so real and yet—the club had been the Raven. And the blond vampire who'd been staked had been Alma. But why hadn't he recognized her, if it was only a dream?

Nick rose from the chair and tried to hide a yawn behind his hand.

"Cat-nap didn't help, huh?" When he glanced at Schanke, his partner shrugged. "You *still* look like hell."

"Thanks." Schanke was right—he felt even more weary than he'd been before his little nap. There was a crick in his back from sleeping in that awkward position. Nick stretched, mild wonderment accompanying the pain—he wasn't supposed to feel things like this. So why the hell did it hurt? "How long was I out?" he asked, trying to gauge time from the relative positions of the various officers and personnel he saw milling around the room.

"Ten minutes. Maybe fifteen."

"Fifteen—?" Nick shook his head, bits of the dream coming back to him. It had seemed like . . . hours. "You're wrong. It must have been longer than that."

Schanke held up his wrist and tapped the face of his watch. "Hey, *I'm* the guy with the watch, remember. Not more than fifteen minutes. And nobody spotted you—I covered. That's what partner's do, right?"

For a moment, Nick stared at him, the phrase echoing in his memory . . . under entirely different circumstances. "Yeah, right." Rubbing his eyes with his fingertips, Nick shook his head again. What was happening to him? Was he going mad?

"Go *home*," pressed Schanke. "Wait a minute—there's the Captain. Cap? You wanna come tell Knight to get his butt back home?"

Nick held his hands out in front of him, hissing, "Schanke, no—" but it was too late. Stonetree ambled over, shirtsleeves rolled up even in the cold squad room. "You sick?" he asked, studying Nick with a squinting gaze. "Schanke's right—you don't look so hot."

Making a dismissive wave with his hand, Nick back-pedaled a step. "Really, Captain, I'm fine."

"Like hell. You look like something we should send to the morgue." Lowering his voice, Stonetree added, "Take a sick day, Knight. For God's sake, you've been here three years. Personnel said the cash you've got in accumulated sick time is killing our budget."

"All right!" he relented, grabbing his coat from the rack. "I'll go. And I *can* drive myself home," he added quickly, as Schanke set down his coffee and got to his feet, mouth opening.

"Good." Stonetree nodded again, then fixed a squint toward Schanke. "You finish up the scene report on that domestic from tonight. The brass wants it bright and early and it's not my butt in the sling if they don't got it. Got it?"

"Yeah," said Schanke, falling back into his seat with a disappointed look.

"Good." Again, Stonetree nodded, as if punctuating the comment. Clapping Nick on the shoulder as he passed, he added, "Get some sleep, will ya? You *do* look like hell."

"Thanks." He forced a smile for Stonetree's benefit, then pointed a finger at Schanke. "And not another word from you!"

Schanke's smile was real and he spread his hands wide. "Hey, is it my fault you usually look like a numbered Zurich account? You come down a peg or two, people are gonna notice. So go *home* already."

"I'm going." Nick reached into his pants pocket for his car keys, but they weren't there. Shrugging into his coat, he dropped his hand into another pocket—

And his fingers closed around a small, hard object. He took the dream doll from his pocket and let it rest on his palm. *Both* of the legs had curled inward.

Unaccountably, a shiver ran through him, jostling the doll from his hand. It fell on Schanke's desk and, before he could do anything, his partner picked it up. "Hey, cute!" he noted, examining the brightly colored wicker doll. "Although I think you're kinda old to be playing with these things."

Nick moved to take the doll from Schanke, then stopped himself, his hand frozen in mid-air. He didn't want to touch it. "I, uh, picked it up in the parking lot," he explained quickly. "Do me a favor, toss it in the trash."

"This little thing?" Schanke touched the folded legs of the doll gingerly. "Too bad it's broken. Although you can fix stuff like this if you soak it in water—softens it up—or so Myra claims. Maybe Jenny'd want it—"

"No!" Schanke shot him a look, surprised at his sudden hostility, and Nick forced another smile. "Who knows where it's been?" he said, in what he hoped was a sensible explanation. "Just toss it, okay?"

"If that's what you want." Shrugging, Schanke dropped the doll to the top of his desk, beside his coffee cup, then pointed toward the door. "Go!"

Having second thoughts about trusting Schanke with the errand, Nick stared at the doll. He reached out, as if to touch it, but the steam from the coffee wafted over his hand. On an impulse, Nick stuck his finger in the cup of coffee, then into his mouth. Only when he saw Schanke staring at him in horror, then at his violated coffee cup, did Nick realize what he'd done. He wanted to explain, but there *was* no rational explanation, even as the rich taste of the hot liquid lingered in his mouth.

"Going," he whispered distractedly. Nick headed for the door, hands in his pockets, feeling like a weight had lifted from his shoulders. He'd gotten rid of the doll. No more dreams.

"And take off tomorrow, too," called Schanke, from behind him.

Merely holding his hand up in a wave, Nick didn't bother answering. Now that the doll was gone, he'd be able to get some *real* sleep.

Chapter 3

I had a Dream
Which was not all a Dream.

The drive home was uneventful, although the streets seemed awfully deserted. Somehow, it seemed wrong that so few people were out this close to midnight. Didn't they know the sun would be rising in five hours—no . . . seven? He made the correction automatically, as he pulled his car into the garage. It was winter, after all, and the dark lasted longer.

He leaned against the wall of the lift to his loft and closed his eyes. Just thinking about a good eight to ten hours of uninterruped sleep set him at ease. He'd have a drink first—the hunger for blood was beginning to gnaw at his insides—then shower and hit the sack. He might even skip the shower . . . although his skin felt itchy, like he was covered with sweat and grime.

Yawning as the lift doors opened and he walked into the loft, Nick decided that even the itch of his skin wouldn't keep him from falling asleep the second he stopped moving. Tossing his leather jacket over a chair, he headed for the refrigerator in the kitchen. He opened the door, grabbed the first bottle that came to his hand, pulled out the cork with his teeth and spit it out. He started to touch the lip of the bottle to his lips when the smell assaulted him—

Blood.

A tremor ran through his body and his stomach heaved unmercifully. His fingers trembled and the bottle slipped. Only the fact that he jumped back so quickly kept him from being covered by the thick red liquid as the bottle smashed on the floor, sending spatters of red and shards of glass everywhere.

Nick stared at the mess, his hand going to the refrigerator for support as the tremors continued to race through him. The smell had gotten stronger, if anything. He took a few steps away and leaned on the wall between the living room and kitchen, trying not to gag.

The feeling passed after a moment. Even the heavy scent of the spilled blood seemed to lessen. And his hunger returned, burning hot and bright in his chest. Nick rested his hand against his heart, closed his eyes and took a deep breath, willing himself to relax. Nothing like this had ever happened before. He accepted the hunger as a good sign and turned back to the kitchen.

Ignoring the spilled blood, and avoiding the edges of it where possible, he opened the refrigerator door and reached for another bottle. But he hesitated, his fingers inches from the glass. The smell of blood assaulted him again and he closed the refrigerator quickly, leaning heavily against the door.

He closed his eyes again, but the smell wouldn't go away this time. It nauseated him, sending his stomach heaving and tying his throat in knots. Opening his eyes, he stumbled into the living room, not caring that he created a trail of blood wherever he stepped.

His fingers closed around the edge of the leather couch and he threw himself onto it, fighting back the revulsion. It took longer this time, but the nauseous feeling slipped away again. Only his hunger still burned within him.

But he didn't care. The weight of all that lost sleep pressed down upon him until he fell as if he were being smothered. He closed his eyes, cheek resting against the familiar feel of the couch, and let sleep

overtake him, knowing that the doll was gone and rest would finally be his.

Shifting in his sleep, a ray of light escaping from the window shade shone in his eyes, piercing the darkness. Nick opened his eyes to the blinding glare, then shut them again just as quickly. He felt exhausted, troubled by those strange dreams that continued to haunt him—a winter world where he walked in darkness and drank blood as a matter of course. A feeling of dread and weariness remained with him, following him back from that cold shadow-land. Shading his eyes with his hand, he started to move, then looked down at the bed beside him.

Janette was curled against him, her head resting in the crook of his arm, her dark hair falling to either side of her face. She seemed so young when she slept, so innocent and carefree. He contented himself by watching her for a moment, the gentle movement of the sheet that covered them both as she breathed, dreaming of . . . what? The time before her wealthy family had joined the bandwagon and turned, then cast her out when she'd refused to come across and surrender her light to darkness? Of how LaCroix had rescued her from the dangers of the street and the night? Or when Nick had joined their attempts to save the lost mortals, during that bloody time before law was again imposed and chaos was the rule of the day?

Her sleepy smile was too soft for such dark thoughts. Leaning over to kiss her forehead, he had a sudden flash of memory—that sun-bronzed face turned white, eyes dark, lashes blackened with makeup, red lips redder still with blood. He stared down at her, wondering where the image had come from. Not memory—Janette wore makeup only when disguised, though she wore that well enough. Could it be from his dream, a companion to all of the other disquieting images that swam through his brain?

Carefully, so as not to disturb her, he slipped from the bed and dressed for his work, although the clock said he had an hour before he had to leave for his shift. He was anything but graceful at the best of times and now everything he touched seemed to slip through his fingers—his watch, his shoes, his badge, all ended up on the floor at one point or another—but Janette's reaction was nothing more than a sigh, as she shifted her position in the bed. His eyes kept returning to her, as he buttoned his shirt, knotted his tie. When he'd returned from shift, he'd found her, instead of LaCroix. She'd promised him that Jenny was fine, agreed that LaCroix should never have done such a thing, and admitted that Jenny had told her about his authorization to turn . . . as well as the promise to refuse the summons to darkness.

He'd had to make that promise again, to Janette. And his attempts to comfort her fears had gone further than he'd intended—as they had so many times before. There was something in Janette's manner and eyes that never failed to touch his heart. Too many had died the day she'd first crossed his path. Her smooth skin and sweet smile helped erase much of the memory of blood that had threatened to haunt his dreams that night and for many nights after. It was she who had brought him to LaCroix. And it was at least a year or so after that before he'd realized that she'd been ordered to ensnare him, to bring him to the man who orchestrated the attacks of a mortal refugee resistance force with all the skill and care he'd once applied to one of his concert performances.

But he'd forgiven her that. For although Janette was under orders and slept with whomever LaCroix wished, assuming whatever role was necessary, she always returned to Nick. The word 'love' was never mentioned. Love was a dangerous indulgence in a world where death walked the night and human blood was a commodity. They gave each other comfort, pleasure, and a little of the joy that still managed to survive in their hearts.

Slipping his badge into the inner pocket of his suit coat, Nick turned to look at her, one more time. If

his plans succeeded, he'd never see her again. He couldn't take her from this place—too much of her belonged to LaCroix. He suspected that they'd been lovers upon occasion, but doubted that was what held her to the master musician, turned resistance leader. Nick knew too well how the power of his magnetism ensnared the soul, fired the imagination. He'd grown to believe in LaCroix's cause and had done all he'd been asked—fought and killed, lied and cheated, waited and watched . . . even joined the police force.

The last had been LaCroix's undoing. Nick took his oaths seriously. And when he'd spoken those words—to protect and to serve—something in him had changed, twisted beyond the reach of LaCroix and his plotting, or the vampires and their attempt to stabilize their brave new world.

On an impulse, he walked back to the bed and sat down beside her. Nick kissed Janette on the forehead, fearing that she would wake and fearing that she would not. Once more, she sighed, still unable to shake off the heavy hand of slumber, her lips twisted in a sultry smile, her hand outstretched to where he'd slept beside her. Brushing the fingers once with his own, he left her and walked out into the living room.

His heart almost stopped when he saw LaCroix sitting on the seat at the windowsill. The blinds had been opened and the light rained down upon him, burnishing his tan skin and making his hair seem the color of drifting snow. He held his left hand in his right, massaging it, as was his habit when he was lost in thought. Two of the fingers had healed beyond repair, twisted awkwardly.

"Is it bothering you today?"

LaCroix started and that alone dispelled some of Nick's anger—LaCroix was next to impossible to surprise. But he settled back against the window and stared out again. "I'm sorry—I didn't think you'd risen yet. No. Old habits, I suppose. They wouldn't make that mistake now, you know . . . leaving me alive. They'd have turned me or killed me."

"You've taught them how dangerous mercy can be."

A twisted smile crossed LaCroix's lips. "I suppose I should be thankful I had some fans among their hierarchy. And I *have* taught them a thing or two, since then. I suppose it's a saving grace that they love their music."

An image flashed before Nick's eyes—LaCroix, in medieval garb, playing some sort of stringed instrument. And Janette, laughing, eyes golden. He shook his head to clear it.

"What?" asked LaCroix, curiously.

"Nothing. A dream I had." He blinked and another image flashed across his eyes—fangs and blood. *His* fangs . . . and human blood. "I was a vampire. And you—you were the one who turned me."

LaCroix laughed and rubbed his neck ruefully. "Such fancies from you, Nicholas. And I thought officers of the law were supposed to be an unimaginative bunch." Then his eyes became hooded. "Jenny said you wanted to speak with me."

"About taking Jenny with you last night. After I'd talked to her, gotten her to trust you?" Quickly, Nick reached behind himself and closed the bedroom door, not wanting to disturb Janette. "You could have faced me yourself."

"Ah, but you have more fun with her." LaCroix's smile disappeared. "I was busy elsewhere. Janette came to you of her own volition this morning—I had nothing to do with it. Although you probably won't believe that."

"Does it matter anymore, what I believe?"

"I don't suppose it does." Sighing, LaCroix drew up his leg, resting his foot on the edge of the table.

"If it's any consolation, it *was* a heavy-handed move and ill-considered. I was wrong. But that *doesn't* mean that I'm not prepared to sacrifice any one of us. Even you."

"For the cause." Nick nodded. "You want me to accept their offer—to be turned."

"Yes." LaCroix turned his head, looking out the window again, into the daylight world. "We need someone on the inside, who has access to information we can't get any other way. You'll be perfect."

"Even if it kills me? Makes me what you hate the most?"

"We *all* make sacrifices."

Nick flopped down onto the couch, the noise catching LaCroix's attention, even if his words couldn't. "You saved me," he pressed. "You taught me. You brought me to the law—"

"And lost you to it." LaCroix's short laugh was bitter. "You see, I *do* make mistakes. But it was what you were meant to do. I was meant to play symphonies and overtures, while you were meant to . . . what is it? Protect and serve? What better than to serve humanity?"

"At the cost of losing my own?" Nick leaned forward. "You're asking me to give up everything."

"Except survival. No matter what happens, you'll be protected. They *do* protect their own, I'll give them that."

Something was missing from LaCroix's customary manner—his arrogant optimism. And this talk of surviving, should all else fail . . . . "What is it you're not telling me?"

"The artificial blood plant goes on-line tonight."

Their attempts at sabotaging the plant had slowed construction, but Nick hadn't realized it was that close to completion. "You're not ready."

"I know."

"You can't attack." Nick meant the comment as a statement, not a question. LaCroix simply didn't have the numbers or the weaponry.

But LaCroix looked back to the window.

Horrified, Nick jumped to his feet, his voice rising. "You'll be slaughtered!'

"Tonight. Or tomorrow. Or tomorrow night . . . what does it matter? We're going to die eventually. That's what mortality means—death. To die. And if we're going to die, we should make it count for something, make a stand. Their elite will be present, as well as the people who planned and built the damned thing. To get even a few of them might cripple the operation for years, perhaps a decade."

"If you're captured, they'll use you as donors. You'll disappear."

"But if we *live*," countered LaCroix, gesturing with his mangled hand, "we fight another day. Until we win. Or die."

He stared at the man he'd admired, followed, and fought for and beside—there was no gleam of insanity, but the hard, cold ruthlessness shone like a light from his eyes. "You're a fanatic."

"Pragmatic," corrected LaCroix, with a smile. "Even prey have the right to be predators now and again, if they've got the stomach for it."

The eyes told the story—there was nothing he could say that would sway LaCroix from his decision. And those who'd followed him would continue on the path they'd chosen, even when it lead them to the very jaws of hell itself.

Nick turned his back and walked to the table beside the door, picking up the turning papers he'd been given the night before, needing to hold them for a moment. And this was what this madman wanted him to do? To obey without question? To throw his life away on one, futile expression of defiance?

"I'm . . . on duty tonight," he said, after a moment's pause. "They'll assign me to security detail at the

plant."

"I know."

He closed his eyes and leaned against the table, pressing his palms flat against the wood. LaCroix had placed him in a dangerous position—he'd be among the vampires tonight, having taken the oath to serve and protect, performing duties in accordance with the law that governed vampire and mortal alike. But all rights, he should go straight to Stonetree, tell him what LaCroix intended. Lives would be spared on both sides. property saved, the law enforced. He'd fulfill his oath.

And betray LaCroix and the mortal resistance in the bargain. Until last night, their targets had been isolated; they weeded out those vampires who were too vicious or violent or dangerous. The day patrols enforced mortal laws and were meant to protect vampires from just such attacks. The night shift was supposed to work in reverse; but vampires were seldom, if ever, brought in for attacking or killing mortals. He'd been able to reconcile what LaCroix, what he *himself*, had done—hunting down and exterminating individual vampires, in the name of justice. But the attack on the DayClub . . . .

"The club you bombed last night—there were mortals there." He glanced back over his shoulder.

LaCroix looked back to the window. "As I said, sacrifices must be made."

Nick swallowed. "And what about the vampires who were innocent?"

"Innocent?" When LaCroix's angry gaze fixed on him, the image of those eyes turning red-gold sent a shiver through him. "None of *them* are innocent. They're *vampires*."

He'd been right, LaCroix *was* a fanatic. He was willing to risk—to *waste*—the lives of his followers and every other mortal on the planet, to reach his goal—the complete and utter destruction of the vampires. It had been a goal Nick had once accepted, once defended.

But now that he wore the badge, now that he'd worked with and among them, now that he knew the sad state in which so many of them lived . . . how could he condemn *all* vampires for the crimes of a misguided few? Yet, if he turned in LaCroix and his followers, they'd be summarily executed, sent to one of the 'donor' centers, where they'd be drained of their blood, their remains burned to cinders and dumped in a landfill. How could he defend vampires or vampire justice when they were as bad, if not worse, than LaCroix?

The attack on the DayClub heralded the escalation of LaCroix's private war against the vampires. To attack the artificial blood plant was a bold stroke, a desperate stroke, certain for disaster. If, by any chance, it succeeded, the shock waves would be felt around the world. Toronto would become a major center of mortal resistance, as others flocked to follow the leader who had courage and vision enough to sacrifice their lives. LaCroix would have his mortals, to use as pawns in his plots and plans and private army.

There was no way he could stop this plan, but if he was part of it, if he could manage to save even a few of the mortals who'd so blindly placed their faith in LaCroix. The only thing he'd betray would be his oath to serve and protect. And . . . himself.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Buy us time. Get as many out as you can. That's all."

"That's enough." Opening his eyes, Nick turned his head. "I'll try—on two conditions. The first is that Jenny stays here, tonight."

LaCroix smiled and held out his palms, accepting that much. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"I'm leaving in the morning."

The smile vanished, replaced by . . . a blank stare. "To go . . . where?"

"Anywhere." Taking a deep breath, Nick stared at the wall, at the door . . . anything but LaCroix. "I won't be able to stay after I refuse to be turned."

He heard LaCroix move from the window. "You're going to reject the promotion?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because, I want to *live*." Nick turned again and faced LaCroix. "Because, that's all I have left." He paused, licking his lips. "And I'm taking Myra and Jenny with me. That's the second condition."

LaCroix raised a finger to his lips, considering. His gaze fell on the closed bedroom door, which he indicated with a flick of his wrist.

Nick stared at him with hard eyes. "You'll tell Janette. *After* we're gone."

LaCroix's eyes widened slightly—he'd scored a second point, surprising him again. "You're *not* taking her with you?"

"No. In your own way, you've 'turned' her. She belongs to you, now. Like they all do." Shaking his head, Nick took a step toward LaCroix, his hand clenched into a fist. "They're no longer refugees—they're an *army*. *Your* army."

"They're fighting for their humanity . . . ."

"They're fighting for *you*." For a moment, he was angry enough to strike LaCroix . . . but in that pause he regained enough self-control to let his hand drop to his side. Walking to the table, he picked up his car keys, balancing the warm metal in his hands. "You tried to do the same thing with Jenny. And where Jenny goes, Myra follows. I won't let you do that to them. They've suffered enough."

Nick didn't know what reaction he expected . . . or wanted. After another pause, LaCroix said, "Fair enough. Though—will you tell your coroner friend that you're leaving? Does she rate more of a good-bye than Janette?"

The words stung him. He turned quickly, his cheeks burning, although whether at the thought that LaCroix knew what feelings he had for the female vampire or the fact that he'd put off thinking about her, he wasn't certain.

"I'd advise against it," said LaCroix sincerely, his tone devoid of sarcasm. "She *is* one of them."

There was no answer to that. Dropping the keys in his coat pocket, Nick cleared his throat. "I'll be leaving for my shift in a few minutes."

"Then I guess this is good-bye. I won't see you before you leave, but I'll have Myra and Jenny ready for the trip."

"Thank you." They stared at one another for a second, then Nick extended his hand. "Good luck with your war. I hope you survive it."

LaCroix shook his hand, then pulled him into a quick hug. When he drew back, he said, "I hope you find the safe place you're looking for. For your sake, as well as the others. And if you find it . . . let us know."

Nick nodded, suddenly unable to speak. LaCroix tapped him on the shoulder, then headed for the door. But before he left, he turned. "Walk in the light, Nicholas."

"And you," he managed, finding his voice again. But the door had closed before the words left his lips.

Nick shook himself awake after a moment's pause. Opening the closet, he withdrew a backpack and started to gather the things they'd need on their journey and the few mementos that he couldn't leave behind. It didn't take long, but as he worked he found himself stopping every now and again, flashing on

images of himself, Janette, and LaCroix as vampires and, wonder of wonders, Schanke and Natalie as mortals.

It was the latter that held his attention the longest . . . and explained why he'd had such strange thoughts last evening. Was it just a dream? Or was it possible that Natalie's work would eventually bear fruit and she'd become mortal again?

If he left here, perhaps forever, he'd never know.

Slinging one strap of the backpack over his shoulder, Nick took a last look around the apartment. His gaze rested on the bedroom door, but he fought the urge to go back and wake Janette—he'd made his decision. He could live with it.

Avoiding the others on the way out to his car was a little difficult, but he managed that, too. The backpack was hidden in the trunk of his car, beneath the first aid and various evidence kits his job required him to carry. They'd come in handy later, once he, Myra, and Jenny were on the road.

Nick drove to the police station, his mind turning over possible destinations, then discarding them just as quickly. South wasn't an option—the United States was in a worse position than Canada, and the further south one went, the more dangerous things became. He'd heard tales of roving vampire bands traveling north from Central America, turning or murdering all that strayed into their path. If anything, west would be better . . . somewhere out in the back country. They'd find a small, isolated town, untouched by this madness. And he'd carve a niche in that wilderness, using his knowledge to set up defenses until the dust settled and humans *or* vampires ruled. There *had* to be a place like that left. If not . . . he'd build one from scratch.

As the sun hadn't yet disappeared beneath the horizon, traffic was still light. He made the station in record time and clocked in early—it wouldn't do to be late two days in a row. If he was going to make his break in the morning, it had to be clean. Leaving on good terms would gain him some traveling time and distance. Distance might mean survival.

Not surprisingly, Schanke wasn't in yet. He nodded to the members of the exiting shift, stopping to spare a word for one or another of the mortals. But they'd all heard the news—that he'd been offered a chance to turn. From some he got curious stares. The gazes of others held hostility, veiled or open. Still, he smiled and pretended nothing had changed. Nothing could be out of the ordinary tonight.

But *everything* was out of the ordinary. Nick's thoughts kept returning to the supplies in the trunk of his car—there was always one more thing to add. He'd noticed the scratch on his arm from their sortie the day before was almost healed, as was the wound on his head. Whatever Janette had used on the wounds would come in handy on their forced flight, but he wasn't about to call and ask her. He doubted he could come up with a plausible excuse on such short notice. The less possibility he had for contact with Janette, the better.

Nick headed for his desk, some sense of duty still driving him. If there was any chance to leave his cases ready for Schanke, he'd take it. He owed his partner that much. It was while he sat there, filling in the missing details on last night's bombing, that he realized two of the vampire uniformed officers were watching him. Not too openly, but enough to get his attention.

Pretending not to notice, he went on with his business, but tried to place them. They were both patrolmen. One had failed the detective exam just about the time Nick had been switched from day to night shift. They were both vampires. And they'd never been more than civil and often less than that.

They were speaking to one another, one's back half-turned toward him, but both glanced over at him throughout their conversation. Pretending to rub his eyes, Nick stared across the dimly lit room. His lip-

reading capabilities were acceptable, but not advanced, and he found the lack of light in the station defeating any chance he might have to pick out more than one or two words in ten.

Then, suddenly, words began to drift in his direction, the whispers clearer and more audible, as if amplified.

"—Don't know how reliable it is," said the one, shaking his head. "The Captain finds out we raided the fast-track's place with nothing more than the word of one half-dead snitch—"

"Who isn't even around to spill his guts? I *told* you to take him in."

The first cop snarled, "I was hungry!"

"Yeah, well, they're not donuts." The second patrolman frowned and looked toward Nick, who glanced away. "I think he knows something. But the brass'll want him down at the opening tonight, so he won't have a chance to do anything about it."

Someone passed by and the two men parted, then moved into the next room. Nick looked up and tapped his pen against his lips thoughtfully. He'd heard every word, almost as if he'd had the hearing of a vampire. But . . . how? He was as mortal as mortal could get.

And then the words sunk in—these two had it in their heads to raid his apartment building. The same place LaCroix had stashed at least fifty of his refugees!

He reached for the phone and began dialing, then jumped as a hand clamped itself on his shoulder.

Schanke smiled down at him. "We got marching orders, partner. Let's roll."

His heart in his throat, Nick matched Schanke's smile. "I've just got one call to make first—"

That was when Stonetree walked over, frowning. "You still here? I want you down at that plant opening. We've got priority security on this. You'll get area assignments once you show up."

Nick hesitated, then dropped the phone back into its cradle. *Nothing* could seem out of the ordinary. He still had time to warn them—he hoped. "On our way, Captain," he replied, flipping closed the folder on the desk and rising to his feet. He moved to follow Schanke, who was already at the office door.

But Stonetree stopped him, holding up his hands, palms outward. "Nick . . . about our conversation yesterday—have you given any more thought to turning?"

An image from his dream flashed before his eyes—fangs and crimson eyes, flying above tree-tops, the iron-tanged taste of blood on his tongue and lips.

"Yeah," he admitted nervously. "I have. But . . . . nothing's been written in concrete yet."

"I know it's your choice. Remember, the wrong move'll get you tossed off the force. I can't afford to lose a man, or a vampire, like you."

"Captain, I—I've got to go." Slipping between Stonetree and the desk, Nick all but sprinted for the door, not daring to delay his exit any longer. Schanke was already in the car outside, the engine running.

"So, when's the big night?" asked Schanke, with a leer, as Nick slipped into the passenger side.

Ignoring the comment, he closed the door behind him, reached into the glove compartment and pulled the flasher lights out onto the dashboard.

"Are we in a hurry?" asked Schanke, as Nick set the lights flashing.

"We *are*. Because I need to stop off at my apartment before we head uptown."

"Leave something cooking?" asked Schanke. "Or some*one*?"

"I left my badge," said Nick quickly, shutting his eyes and wincing as Schanke drifted perilously close to a large truck, then swerved into another lane, a chorus of car horns following them. "Geez, Schanke, ease back on the throttle. *You* might be immortal, but I'm *not*."

"But that'll change soon enough. And I'm going to want *all* the details—"

Ignoring Schanke's comments, Nick concentrated on the traffic and kept glancing down at his watch. Too slow—they were moving too slowly. If the uniforms had timed their raid properly, he'd only have minutes to warn LaCroix. And he didn't dare stop and phone because he might not get through—phone service having fallen by the wayside, along with reliable electricity, water, and sewer. Each of the utilities was making a comeback, but it was phone he needed now and phone he couldn't depend on.

Finally, the car pulled up at the front of his building. Nick opened the door and leaped from the seat, leaning in the open car window long enough to tell Schanke, "Wait here. I'll be right down," then running up the building steps, taking a few at a time.

Schanke leaned out the car window, calling after him, "The lady in question wouldn't still be hanging around—?"

The rest of Schanke's question was cut off as the apartment building's doors closed behind him. Nick paused inside the foyer. There was no light in the entry way, which was a bad sign—a signal from downstairs that something was wrong. LaCroix's instructions were explicit—when the light was out, get the hell out and to the next safe house.

Was he too late? Had they all been captured?

That's when he was grabbed from behind, arms wrapping around his neck and pulling him back, off balance. One of the two uniformed police officers was suddenly before him, fangs bared and eyes gold. "Nothing here, is there, Knight?" he hissed. "You warned 'em, didn't you. But you weren't smart enough to stay away yourself. They won't okay my family turning, but you—a guy with with a lot to hide—they let turn in six months."

"Maybe *we* should bring him across, Art," breathed the cop, who pinned Nick's arms behind him. "Might do our careers good, having a detective under your thumb." His snarl echoed in Nick's ear.

Art's fangs retracted slightly as he smiled. "Yeah. Might not be a bad idea, at that."

Nick kicked up and backward, not enough to disable the cop behind him, but he managed to free his right arm. He took a shot at Art. Expecting a mortal blow, the cop stood his ground—

And flew backward, to hit the far wall, when Nick's fist connected with his jaw.

If anything, Nick was more surprised than Art. Rubbing his fist, he wondered where the sudden burst of strength had come from. And if he'd be able to count on it again.

He was struck heavily in the small of the back by what felt like a freight train but was probably a piece of furniture. The force of the blow sent him careening head-first into the same wall Art had dented. He slid down the face of the wall, feeling the trickle of blood on his forehead. His eyes wouldn't focus properly and it seemed that every church bell left in the city was clanging simultaneously in his head.

The last thing Nick felt was a pair of strong hands around his throat, the collar of his shirt digging into his skin, and the hot, fetid breath of one of the undead patrolmen.

Nick's eyes shot open and he bit back a cry of alarm and surprise. His lungs heaved, trying to capture air that he didn't need and failed miserably at the task. He shot up from the couch and fell to his knees in front of the coffee table.

There, almost at eye level, sat the dream doll. It seemed to mock him with its little painted face, two legs and an arm now curled tightly in rigor mortis.

With a cry, Nick pushed himself against the couch, terrified out of his wits. The couch slipped backwards, so that he landed on the floor with a thump. In a split second he was back on his knees again,

staring at the doll. He'd left it at the station. How had it gotten here? How?!

"Nick? What's—?"

It was Natalie. Couldn't that woman take no for an answer?

He dug his fingers into the upholstery of the couch, talons ripping through the covering as he pulled himself to his feet. "Leave me *alone*!" he snarled at her, fangs bared.

Natalie's eyes went wide, her mouth opening and forming a terrified 'o,' but only the smallest scream escaped as she backed away from him.

The dream fell away. That shriek, her eyes, and the sound of her running steps brought Nick back to his senses. He was at the elevator before she reached it, ashamed and horrified, and still more than a little weak in the knees.

Her escape blocked, Natalie backed away again. Grabbing a small table for defense, she held it out before her, legs first. "Stay back!" she said shakily.

"I'm . . . sorry—" Nick took a deep breath and a step forward, his hand outstretched toward her. Then his legs gave way and he crashed to the floor.

He *hurt*. He'd managed to catch most of his weight on his hands as he'd fallen, which had saved him from cracking his head on the floor, but the muscle and sinew and bone throughout his body ached or throbbed, letting him know in no uncertain terms that it was there and what the hell was he going to *do* about it?

For the moment, he was content to rest there, his head cradled in his arms, hoping against hope that Natalie would leap over his sprawled body, get into the elevator and run for her life.

Instead, she dropped the table—the crash sending a splitting pain through his skull—and fell to her knees beside him. "Nick, what the *hell* is going on? What just happened? Are you—?"

The cacophony of messages from his muscles suddenly quieted. He waited another moment and, when nothing more happened, rolled onto his side and looked at her. "It's quite possible I'm going mad," he answered, in a quiet voice. "At least, that's the only explanation *I* can come up with."

Natalie's brow furrowed. "You seem lucid. Maybe you should just stay there—"

But he was already climbing to his feet. When she reached to help him, he waved her away, somehow certain that his knees wouldn't give out on him again. Stalking to the couch, then past it, he stared down at the doll. "I left *that* with Schanke. Now it's here. I think it's following me."

A chuckle from Natalie caused him to turn his head. Clearing her throat quickly, she held her hand over her mouth. But it didn't hide the edges of her smile. "It was on Schanke's desk."

"You went to the station?"

"Well, I knew you were rattled, after last night. You never answered my message, so I dropped by the station on my way home and Schanke said you'd gone home sick. Then I saw that on his desk . . . ."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Nick fell back to the couch. He couldn't stop his own smile, feeling a fool but not caring much whether she knew it or not. "And you brought it here?"

Natalie walked over to the coffee table, glancing first at the doll, then at him. "Yeah. You don't really want Schanke touching something like that, do you?"

"If I'd been in my right mind, no." Smiling up at her, he added, "Thanks."

"Don't thank me too quickly," said Natalie, reaching for the doll on the coffee table. "I think I broke it. The arm wasn't bent like that when I—"

"Don't—!" His fingers wrapped around her wrist before she could blink, her hand only inches from the doll. Then he saw the fear in her eyes, mirroring his own. "Don't touch it," he added, trying to control

his voice. "Just, don't touch it."

Natalie placed her hand over the one he'd wrapped around her wrist, wincing. "Nick—?"

He released her, then turned away guiltily, knowing she'd have a bruise there tomorrow. "Sorry."

"I saw the bottle on the kitchen floor when I came in."

Nick started, turning to stare at her, then glancing over his shoulder, toward the kitchen. He'd forgotten about that.

"I cleaned it up," said Natalie evenly. "I tried to be quiet. I was afraid I'd wake you."

"It would have been better if you had," he answered. Leaning forward, he clasped his hands together. "But I think you could have shot off a cannon in here and I wouldn't have heard a thing."

She frowned, eyeing him thoughtfully. "You look like hell."

He winced, hearing her echo of Schanke's and Stonetree's comments. "Is that a diagnosis?"

"The diagnosis is that you're suffering from sleep deprivation." Sitting down beside him on the couch, she reached up to touch his eyelid, but he flinched back. "You need sleep."

Lightly, he brushed her hand away. "I haven't had any."

"Why?"

"Because of that." He pointed to the dream doll, then rested his elbows on his knees and regarded it with a baleful glare.

Natalie moved her hand toward it, but stopped in mid-motion when she saw his eyes follow the movement. "What did you call it?" she asked, slowly drawing back her hand. "A . . . dream doll?"

"I've got a confession to make. I've been living two lives."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Not like that," he said, shaking his head. Sighing again, he leaned back against the couch. "Here . . . I'm me. When I fall asleep, I wake up somewhere else."

"And you're . . . somebody else?"

He couldn't quite hide his wan smile. "Some*thing* else," he corrected. "Mortal."

Up to this point, he'd sensed a willingness in Natalie to go along with his train of thought, but his last sentence derailed that completely. She met his eyes with a guarded gaze, her only comment, "Uh-huh."

"LaCroix and Janette are there—mortals, too."

"You haven't watched *The Wizard of Oz* lately, have you?"

Nick pushed himself up from the couch and walked toward the television set. "No. That would be too easy." Turning, he placed his hands in his pants pockets and stared at the doll. "It's like being awake, twenty-four hours a day, round-the-clock."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but it sounds like we're straying into psychology. That's *not* my field." But when he looked up at her, she sighed. "And you're not about to walk into an office and say, 'Hi, I'm a vampire. And I've got a sleep disorder. Do you work nights?'"

"That's about the size of it. I'm afraid you're all I've got."

"Thanks for the confidence." Frowning, she raised a finger to her lips. "Okay, so when did this begin? *Exactly*."

"When I took *that* home with me."

Natalie shifted her position on the couch, moving away from the doll as he pointed at it. "That's a start. So, what do you know about it?"

He scratched the back of his head thoughtfully and took a few steps away. "I saw a reference to it in a book on South American dreamquests. It's supposed to lead you to your heart's desire."

"How?"

The question stopped him in his tracks. Turning, he shrugged and gave her a blank stare. "Beats me."

"Nick! I thought we talked about this. If you're going to trust me with trying to bring you back across, you can't keep playing with this—this—voodoo nonsense. *Especially* if you don't know what it does."

He returned to the couch and sat down beside her. Taking her hand in his, he said, "You're absolutely right. And I wouldn't blame you if you lectured me non-stop for a week. But can we get this little problem solved first?"

Slipping her hand out from between his, Natalie smiled. "Okay—no lectures. Tell me what happens when you try to sleep."

"I . . . fall asleep. And I wake up somewhere else. I'm mortal." He touched his forehead gingerly, the memory of a throbbing pain returning briefly. "I . . . live. And when I go to sleep there, I wake up here, exhausted." He shook his head, trying to remember more of the details of his dream, but they seemed to slip away as he chased after them. "The real problem is that I can't eat—the smell of blood makes me nauseous."

"So . . . there's a good side to this?"

"Unless I starve." He pointed at the doll. "And a part of that bends every time I dream."

Natalie was staring at him. "You're kidding."

"You saw it in the lab," he said evenly. "It was straight as an arrow, right?"

She looked down to the doll, then back at him. "Okay, yeah. You're right." Then she shook her head and stood. "This is crazy. It's just a doll."

"It's a *dream* doll." When she gave him a hesitant look, he held out his hand and ticked off his fingers. "Look, it's taken seriously in a number of cultures—South America, African, Indian, Asian—"

"Voodoo," stated Natalie, again.

Nick frowned. "No. That has nothing to do with this. That's an entirely different system of belief."

"And the woman you got it from . . . ?"

He'd been waiting for that question. Leaning back against the couch, he met her inquisitive stare with an even gaze. "We won't be able to reach her unless she wants to be reached."

"What?"

"Trust me on this." When she raised an eyebrow, he added, "Natalie, *you* met her. You tell me."

Sitting on the arm of the couch, she looked off into space for a moment, then shivered. "Yeah. Maybe you're right." Turning, her gaze fell back on the doll. "Get rid of it."

"I *can't* get rid of it. I've tried. It keeps coming back." Nick reached forward and, after a glance at Natalie, picked up the doll. "I think . . . it's going to kill me."

Natalie snorted. "Nick, that's silly."

"What's my heart's desire?" He dropped the doll to the table, then gestured toward her when she didn't answer.

She met his eyes. "To live as a mortal."

"Which I'm doing *in* the dream. And what's mortality but . . . death."

It sounded right, the words making sense when he spoke them aloud. Natalie slid down the arm of the couch onto the seat beside him and touched his shoulder. "Nick, you *can't* be serious. It's not real—"

"And this *is*?" He stood up and walked away from her, running his hand through his hair. "I can't go

on like this for much longer. I can't eat. I can't sleep . . . ."

"Maybe I can do something about that."

He whirled, some small spark of hope igniting in his chest. But then he asked suspiciously, "Drugs? Because we've tried others—"

"And they haven't worked. But—" Natalie smiled brightly "—we've never tried to put you to sleep before, have we?"

"I wish you hadn't put it quite in those terms," he said edgily. Then Nick looked down at the doll again. "But I'm willing to try just about anything. Those dreams were . . . weird. The world was different. The same but . . . different. They continued, dream-to-dream, night-to-day, day-to-night. And when I'm there, it's like I'd never been *here*, that being *there* is the way things are supposed to be."

"I suppose a psychologist *is* out of the question?"

He gave her a nod. "On such short notice, yes."

"Then I'm off to the lab." Natalie stood, then headed for the elevator, catching her coat and scarf on the way. Nick picked up her mittens from a chair, meeting her at the elevator door. She paused there and fixed him with a curious look. "You were in the dream. And Janette. And you were *both* mortals?"

An image from the dream flashed before Nick's eyes—Janette's creamy skin, those soft lips . . . . "Uh . . . yeah."

"Was *I* there?"

Nick met her eyes and suddenly another image filled his vision. The eyes were harder and darker, the skin paler, the teeth white as pearl . . . until the eyes turned gold and the fangs appeared. "Yes."

"And?"

He looked away, unable to tell the difference between reality and illusion anymore. "You were a vampire. And you wanted to turn me, bring me across." Nick dared a glance at her.

Natalie's eyes had widened slightly, her lips pursed. "I think," she said, after a pause, "that we *definitely* have to put a stop to this." Then she smiled and took her mittens from his hands. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Stay awake. Play music or . . . something. But stay *awake*."

"I'll try."

"Good."

And neither of them knew what more to do. Nick stared at her, wanting to thank her for trying, for caring, for not running away. He wanted desperately to apologize for scaring her, for scaring himself. But he didn't have the words.

For her own part, Natalie seemed uncertain as well, meeting his eyes and then glancing away. It was an awkward moment, saved only by the opening of the elevator door. Natalie darted inside, waved, then was hidden from view by the closing door.

Nick walked back to the living room, drawn to the doll on the table. He picked it up, placing it in his palm, gently poking it with his finger. Only the arm and head were left. If each part bent when he had a dream, it meant he had two dreams remaining. Two more dreams, until . . . .

What?

Chapter 4

All that we see or seem
Is but a Dream within a Dream.

"I'll wait. Thanks." Nick sighed and seated himself on the couch, the cellular phone at his ear. Looking up at the canvas he'd been working on all day, he grimaced. It was nothing . . . less than nothing. Color had been layered over color, forming great swaths of muddy rainbows, but there was no form to the work, no art to the substance. It had been something to do during the daylight, as Natalie continued to phone every few hours with messages of hope, but nothing concrete to alleviate his condition. Painting had helped to keep him awake, if not lucid.

Rising, he walked over to the stereo and turned down the thunderous music he'd been playing all day, suddenly realizing why the secretary on the other end of the line kept asking him to repeat himself. She probably thought he was in a bar, calling in sick because he'd over-indulged or had a big night planned. Then again, what did he care *what* she thought?

Nick leaned his head back, massaging the muscles at the back of his neck with his free hand. For a moment, his attention was caught by the dust clustered on his ceiling lights—he'd have to take care of that, when he got a chance. Then he shook his head and returned to the couch, trying to concentrate on the phone call. His attention kept slipping from one thing to the next, focus eluding him.

"Detective Knight?" said the secretary. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting—"

"Yes?"

"—But the Captain's on another call. I'll pass along the message. I hope it's nothing *too* serious?"

He wasn't certain whether the comment was a pleasantry or a sarcastic barb. "I'll check in tomorrow with an update," he promised.

"Just get plenty of sleep. And chicken soup. You know, if you don't have any on hand, I get off shift in an hour. I'll be happy to run some—"

"Thanks, Sharon, but I'm fine." He paused, stopping himself from mentioning that Natalie was looking after him—what would the secretarial pool make of *that* slip? "Good night."

Quickly, he cut off the call, then tossed the receiver onto the coffee table. After nearly attacking Natalie this afternoon, he couldn't trust himself around mortals. All he needed was a well-meaning co-worker trying to force feed him chicken broth . . . .

His stomach rumbled at the thought of feeding, but he wasn't about to repeat the disaster of last night and waste another bottle of blood. Picking up the remote, he opened the shutters, then walked back to the stereo and turned the music up as high as it would go.

The sudden blare of sound caught him unaware and he reached for the dial, dulling the noise to a low roar. After choosing from several paint brushes, he daubed into a color on his palette at random and drew a broad stroke across his canvas. Distraction, that was the answer. Keep busy. Don't think, just do.

But images kept flashing through his mind like one of Janette, laughing in the sunshine and LaCroix picking up a rucksack from the ground, his skin bronze and streaked with dirt. He'd never known them as mortals, they'd turned centuries before Janette had seduced him to the dark and LaCroix brought him

across, into the night.

But still he moved the brush, choosing another color. Then his hand stilled as he pictured Schanke, paused over the suspect's throat, eyes red-gold and fangs extended, snarling in blood-lust.

Nick put aside the palette, carefully placing it on the table top and moving to a coffee can that held a selection of brushes. He tested the stiffness of bristles against his hand and suddenly found he was holding Jenny against his chest, his hand stroking her hair in an attempt to comfort her. Opening his eyes, he whirled, sensing another presence in the room, feeling hot breath on his throat, as fangs descended.

He threw the brush in his hand like a dagger . . . but there was no one there. The brush hit the wall and clattered to the floor, trailing streaks of green paint against the plaster. Enraged, he tipped the canvas from the easel. It seemed to have grown heavier and he had to struggle with it, but then it turned and ripped, as the frame splintered.

The sound brought momentary satisfaction. Then Nick looked around the mess of his apartment and knew that he had to get out, into the night. There had to be somewhere he could go where he wouldn't be a danger to others, where he could distract himself with sound and motion. And . . . where he could be watched. Where he could be kept from sleeping.

Deciding that the lack of sleep that had kept so obvious an answer from him, Nick lurched to the couch. He picked up the phone and dialed, falling back against the sofa. "Hello, Grace? Is Natalie busy? It's Nick."

"Nick? Hi—we heard you called in sick. Hope it's nothing serious."

He started, staring at the far wall. "I only called the station ten minutes ago—"

"A combination of woman's intuition, Natalie's attitude, and the best damn intelligence network ever developed—inter-office gossip. Believe me, honey, if you *sneeze*, we know about it before you can blow your nose."

Grace's easy manner made him smile. "I'll remember that next time I need a lead on a case. About Natalie—?"

"She just started cutting a priority from downtown. If you want, I'll stick my head in—"

"No." Nick sat up on the couch, his eyes falling on the dream doll, which was still sitting on his coffee table. "Just leave her a message. Tell her . . . tell her I'm going to see a friend about a black bird."

"A friend? About a bird? Nick, if you're sick, you shouldn't be running around doing favors for peop—"

It was the best he could come up with. Tell Grace that he was going to the Raven and he had a feeling that half of the law enforcement agencies on the continent would have the information by morning. "I know, but I promised. Just give her the message, Grace."

"You're too sweet for your own good, Nick. I'll pass it along as soon as she's out of her scrubs."

"Thanks Grace. See you tomorrow night." He pressed the disconnect button on the phone, adding, "Hopefully," beneath his breath.

Deciding upon the course of action, he jumped to his feet and headed for the elevator door, grabbing his leather jacket from a chair as he ran. But when he reached the elevator, he stopped, and turned.

The doll was still on the coffee table. He didn't particularly want to keep it with him . . . but could he safely leave it behind? What if Natalie dropped by, found the doll, and got rid of it, deciding that his affliction *was* a mental malady? And what might it do, if left to its own devices, with a defenseless mortal to prey upon?

Slowly, Nick walked back to the coffee table, his feet feeling like they were weighted with lead. He

picked up the doll with two fingers, staring at it, but the painted dots that formed a perpetual expression of astonishment never changed.

"I guess we're in this together."

The doll stared idly back, seemingly disinterested.

Nick tucked the wicker doll into his jacket pocket, then once again made his way to the door, each step measured. On the ride down in the elevator, he tucked his hands in his coat pockets. When his fingers brushed against the doll, he clutched the thing tightly, not shying away. He knew it was too late for that. Whatever was happening was going to continue happening, until it came to its own end. Nothing he could do would change that.

Downstairs, in the garage, he considered flying, but the cold night air sent a shiver through him. Nick ran his hand along the metal hood of the caddy as he walked to the driver's side, then slipped behind the wheel of his car. After pressing the automatic garage door opener, he reached for the switch to turn on the interior heat, then stopped himself. He'd never used it when he was alone in the car before. The cold usually didn't bother him.

But another shiver decided him. He turned on the blower, then the heat, after the engine warmed the chilled air. His fingers tightened around the steering wheel, until he felt the textured covering making an impression on his skin, but he still concentrated on everything—his speed, the traffic around him, lights and stop signs, and signals.

It was the longest trip he'd even taken . . . or so it seemed. But he got there in one piece and without having endangered the life and limb of any mortal motorist or pedestrian. It was a victory, of sorts. And he'd needed a victory.

His confidence somewhat restored, he nodded toward the bouncer, who waited just inside the Raven's doorway, and was let through with no more recognition than a nod. The volume of the music stunned his senses as he entered, stopping him for a moment. Even his eyes seemed dazzled by the strobing lights and smoke-filled interior. Nick didn't know why, but everything seemed so much more . . . intense. And he'd begun to doubt his earlier faith in the Raven as a safe haven—the music would surely drive him mad after an hour or two. He could already feel the beginning of a headache throbbing at his temples.

A hand touched his shoulder and he nearly jumped out of his skin, relaxing only when Janette slipped behind him. Nick twisted his head away and sneezed, suddenly overcome by the strength of her perfume. When his eyes finally focused again, she was staring at him, hands on her hips, a lit cigarette blazing in a holder.

"Nicola, you look like shit."

Her direct language was meant to shock him, get his attention. As it was, it made him smile. "Thanks. And it's nice to see you, too." He walked past her, further into the depths of the club, skirting the edge of the dance floor, where bodies writhed to a pounding beat.

Janette followed. "Perhaps you need a drink. It's on the house—as always." She raised her hand, signaling to Alma.

"No!" Nick caught her wrist, encircling it with his fingers, then let his fingers slide to intertwine with hers. "Sorry—I'm on a short fuse. What I need is a place to unwind for a while. I need . . . to stay awake."

Janette's eyes widened and she easily slipped her hand from his grip, even after he tried to maintain the contact. "How can you sleep at night? It's positively . . . uncivilized."

"Just don't ask, all right?"

Her eyes were still curious, but she nodded slightly, looking back to the dance floor. The music had

changed, melding into yet another tuneless, throbbing piece of electronic nonsense. Janette began to sway to the sound and draped her arm around his neck, gesturing with the cigarette in her other hand, toward the dance floor. "Come dance with me, Nicola. It must be half a century since we've last danced."

"I'm not about to break that streak," he said, carefully removing her arm from his shoulder.

"Spoilsport. You won't drink and you won't dance. I don't suppose you're willing to do much else, are you?" Her blue eyes were still glued to the dance floor, but he saw her annoyance flicker red, like fire, in the depths. "Take a booth at the back. That scowl might scare off some of my paying customers."

"Thanks." He took her hand in his and raised it to his lips.

Almost instantly, she pulled her hand away from him. "Oooo! Your lips are warm." Shivering, she held the hand close to her chest, meeting his examining stare. "What? Have I smeared my eye shadow?"

He smiled, seeing in his mind's eyes a Janette with tanned skin and paler lips. "I was trying to imagine what you'd looked like as a mortal."

Her lip curled back in distaste. "Ugh! What morbid thoughts you have tonight, Nicola!" Gesturing over her shoulder, toward the booths, she added, "I may join you in a little while, if your mood improves."

Then Janette swayed out across the dance floor; her movements timed to the music, she snaked her way through the crowd. He watched her for a moment more, but his thoughts kept returning to the soft line of a neck beneath his lips, and short, lightly polished nails running down the length of his chest. Each reality was enticing by itself, but together he found them intoxicating.

Shaking himself awake, Nick allowed himself a moment of self-congratulation—Janette had proven to be the ultimate distraction many times in his past and now, it seemed, in his dreams. He wandered back to the empty booth she'd indicated. Partially shielded by a pillar, it was an island of relative peace in the sonic storm that battered his senses.

The club suddenly seemed warm and stuffy. Nick peeled off his leather jacket, throwing it onto the booth cushion beside him. Licking his lips, he wondered how he might signal Alma for a glass of water—his throat was dry. Then again, if she came anywhere near him with blood . . . he didn't want to know what would happen if he became uncontrollably nauseous again. Janette was annoyed at him enough as it was. Making a scene would add injury to insult. And losing this safe haven was the last thing he wanted.

Relatively certain that not even the dead could rest in the motion-filled atmosphere of the club, Nick sank back against the padded cushions of the booth and watched the dancers. The light played off their skin, turning colors as it danced in rhythmic patterns that matched the music. He found it soothing, after a bit. And even the music seemed to drop away, as the light danced across his eyes and his mind . . . .

The sting of a slap across his face brought him back to awareness. Raising a hand, he caught a second blow before it landed and scrambled back against the wall even before his eyes had fully focused.

"Easy, partner," said Schanke's voice. "Slow down—they're gone."

But Nick wiped a hand across his eyes, to clean away the blood that still trickled from his forehead. Surprisingly, he had no trouble focusing on Schanke's concerned expression, despite the lack of light. "They double-teamed me," he explained, rising to his feet, ignoring groaning muscles and Schanke's attempts to stop him. "I didn't see them until it was too late."

"You're lucky they didn't see *me* until it was too late for *them*. And I'm even luckier they didn't get a chance to sink their teeth into you—or I'd be looking for a new partner."

Wincing, Nick touched his neck, but Schanke was right, he *hadn't* been bitten. He touched his hand to the cut on his forehead, then glanced down at his palm. The blood wasn't all that fresh. But . . . he'd only been hit a moment ago. He shouldn't be healing that quickly, nor should he have been able to knock Art into the wall with one punch. He was *only* mortal, after all . . . .

"Maybe you should take a load off," said Schanke. He moved just out of reach, looking at Nick and then glancing away. "You could call in sick—"

The behavior bothered Nick for a moment, then he realized that he was spattered with blood from his head wound. That would be driving any vampire crazy. "And let those bozos win?" He took a tentative step toward the staircase and, when he didn't fall, continued on his journey. "Just let me wash some of this off and change my shirt."

"You're going to the plant opening after this?" asked Schanke from behind him, in wonder.

Nick paused, his hand on the banister, already several steps up the staircase. "Why not? I'm a cop, aren't I? That's my assignment." He frowned, not daring to tell Schanke the other reason he needed to be there—to provide an escape route for as many of LaCroix's people as he could.

The frown shifted to Schanke's face, but he nodded, then looked away quickly, a hint of red in his eyes. "I'll wait here. In case those yahoos come back. Geez, cops against cops! Makes you wonder what the world's coming to. Can't count on anything anymore."

"Sure you can—partner." He gave his friend a 'thumb's up,' then headed up the stairs as quickly as the throbbing in his skull and his unsteady legs would allow.

Nick hesitated once at the top of the stairs—the door to his apartment was open. Drawing his gun, he stood just to one side of the door, then peered in cautiously.

It had been tossed, none-too-professionally. Holstering his gun, he sighed and started through the wreckage, guessing that the rogue vampires had caused the damage. Then again, a quick mental inventory told him that things had not only been moved but *removed*. LaCroix and his people had scavenged everything they could before they left. Which meant that Art and his friend couldn't have found anything too incriminating in their attempted search.

They'd left towels in the bathroom, happily. Barely glancing at the shattered mirror over the sink, Nick wet one of the towels and held it against his forehead. He sat on the side of the bathtub and dabbed gently at the wound. The cold water stung at first, but the pain of the wound was already reduced to a dull ache.

Curious, he moved back to the sink and tried to find enough mirror to examine the area. Where he'd expected to find a gash needing several stitches, he found only a thin cut, which had already stopped bleeding.

He almost dropped the towel in the sink. Instead, he wet it again and dabbed at the trail of drying blood that ran down his neck. There wasn't a lot he could do about his suit coat, but he knew he'd left at least one clean shirt behind, even after his brief packing earlier in the evening.

Returning to the bedroom, he stripped off his suit coat and tossed it onto the bed, the holster next, then letting the shirt with the bloody collar follow. It was while he was shrugging into a clean shirt, that his gaze fell to the bed, resting there. Even that had been stripped clean. But he could swear he still smelled the scent of Janette.

The sound of a car horn from below startled him. Ignoring the heat, Nick shrugged into his holster and picked up his suit coat from the bed. Tucking in the tails of his shirt, he headed for the living room. He kept his eyes fixed on the door, then the hallway, not wanting to see any more of the damage that had

been done to this place, which had been so much a part of his life.

His aches and pains were almost gone by the time he hit the lower landing. Nick ran to the car and opened the passenger side, slipping into the front seat beside Schanke. "I'm ready, let's roll," he announced.

"Finally!" sighed Schanke. He gestured toward the car's police radio. "We've gotten three calls. There's probably steam coming out of Stonetree's ears—I told 'em we were caught in traffic."

"It'll do." He slid his arm into his suit coat as the car started rolling, then fastened his seatbelt, pulling the car door closed even as Schanke steered into the street. "Not a word, all right."

"About what happened?" Frowning, Schanke kept his eyes on the road. "Nick, those guys have to be stopped—"

"And I'm *not* in a position to do it right now. I'm on thin ice, what with the promotion and all."

It wasn't much of an excuse, but the worry lines on Schanke's forehead seemed to lessen. "Yeah. I guess." Then, he grinned. "Don't want anything to interrupt your hot date with Natalie, huh?"

Nick looked away quickly, out the car window, into the darkness of the street. "Yeah," he answered, without enthusiasm. His reflection looked back at him and he saw her image in his mind's eye—that softer, mortal Natalie of his dreams, just within reach, yet forever forbidden. Even there, in the fantasies of sleep, he was kept apart from her. Shaking his head, he tried to concentrate on the traffic, on the road ahead, on anything but the dreams that plagued him or his sudden near-turning at the hands of the rogue cops.

Despite Schanke's unorthodox driving patterns, they were still bogged down in traffic. By the time he glanced at his watch, he realized that they would arrive ten minutes before the opening address, if that. And he wasn't too far off. The lights and siren gained them entry to a side street lined with marked and unmarked police cars. From there, he and Schanke sprinted for the operations center, to the left and behind the podium.

Schanke outpaced him easily and Nick struggled to keep up, as he passed through the crowds that gathered before the podium amd the plant. He was further slowed in that his eyes kept scanning for familiar faces, any of LaCroix's people. As he turned his head, he thought he caught of glimpse of violet silk, and a flash of dark hair—one of the refugees he'd seen in the basement. But if she had been there, she blended quickly into the crowd.

Was she one of LaCroix's pawns? He had no idea where they were going to be or what type of operation they'd planned. Which was worse, his not-so-casual glances at the make-up of the crowd created a hard lump at the pit of his stomach. Sure, the vampire hierarchy, the engineers, the builders—they were all there. But so were a lot of mortals. Some wore uniforms—obviously plant personnel—while protesters carried placards. But among the rest of the crowd he could see other mortal faces, sweating in the unnatural evening swelter, who had come to see what this 'new step forward in vampire-mortal relations' would mean for them.

How many of them would die this night, because of LaCroix's 'cause'? His badge felt heavy in his jacket—weighing him down. By all rights, he should stick to the oath he had sworn, to protect and to serve all citizens, be they mortal or vampire. But he couldn't betray LaCroix. Too many other lives depended upon him. And he knew then that the lives lost this night—vampire, mortal, and police—would weigh heavily on his soul, for the rest of his natural days.

Then he broke through into the operations area, vetted by a nod from one of the precinct uniforms and almost falling as the crush of people dissolved and he stumbled into a clear, but well-trafficked area. Schanke raised a hand and Nick ran to join him, momentarily catching a fierce gaze from Stonetree, who

was at the edge of the dais and talking into a police band microphone.

"We're going to be burned to a crisp when this is over," commented Schanke, as Nick approached.

"I'm surprised the beams from his eyes didn't fry me on the spot." Nick turned his back to the place he knew Stonetree to be, but felt an itch right between his shoulder blades. "What'd we miss?"

"It seems that the high and mighty want to meet you after the festivities. They wanted to meet you earlier . . . ."

Nick winced. "So, we'll have to tell them about my previous engagement with our friends from the force?"

"Stonetree covered. Officially, you were on 'special assignment.' Unofficially . . . we've not gonna have any choice. Telling him the truth is the only thing that *might* save our careers." Frowning, he scratched behind his ear. "I'm too old to fly a beat—especially to cover for those morons."

"Knight! Schanke!" called the duty officer. She stalked over to them, clipboard in hand. Her eyes narrowed. "Took your time showing up."

"You know the traffic—" began Schanke, but she cut him off quickly.

"West side of the plant, we've got three entrance doors. The roof's covered on that side by two uniforms and we've got the outer doors covered, but there's a loading bay with an alley entrance."

"We've got *door* duty?" asked Schanke, his voice ending on a disappointed note.

"Hey, after showing up this late, you're lucky you've still got badges." Still, she offered Nick a smile. "Heard you got your papers. Congratulations. And if they let you keep them—after this stunt—and you need a sponsor . . . ?"

The redhead gave him a wink, then moved on, her voice raised in someone else's direction. Schanke jabbed him in the ribs with his elbow and Nick winced as the vampire forgot to pull back on the punch. "Lucky dog! You'd better tell them Natalie's got the job and soon, or there's gonna be blood on the floor and fistfuls of hair in the locker room."

Nick's only answer was a grunt, as he headed in the direction the duty officer has indicated, trusting Schanke to keep up. There were a lot of unfamiliar faces in uniform, which meant that several precincts were covering security for this event. He knew LaCroix would have taken additional security into account, but he couldn't help but wonder if this would end up being the disaster he feared . . . or far worse. Blood *would* run in the streets tonight, but what would happen to the innocent mortals afterward?

He cursed beneath his breath, hating himself for not stopping LaCroix from pursuing this madness, for not finding *some* way to prevent this. But it was too late for self-recrimination. He was here. That was what mattered.

The growl of his stomach brought him back to himself. He'd eaten that morning, when he'd returned, then forced himself to choke back a burger on the way to the station—but the smell of the cooked meat had turned his stomach and he'd thrown most of it in the trash. Even the scent of the brewed coffee at the station—which he swore had gotten him through the first three months after his change from day to night shift—failed to interest him. Nick took the return of his appetite as a good sign, albeit inconvenient.

There were uniforms on either side of the alley—strangers from another precinct, probably. Nick nodded to them as he showed his badge, absently noticing that they were both mortals. Schanke, following the same procedure beside him, said, "Guess they're calling in day shift. You'd have figured they'd have given us more warning on something like this."

"Yeah—and give everyone who wants this place leveled equal warning?" At Schanke's disbelieving stare, he smiled, "Come on, Schank—I was the only one in that station who *didn't* know my papers were

coming through. The place is worse than a sieve."

There were few lights in the alley. At mid-point, they stopped, looking around. "Want to take the front or back?" asked Schanke.

"Back," said Nick, grinning. "You head off into the shadows and you're gonna end up snoring."

"Yeah. Right." But Schanke met the grin. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and shook one out. Tucking it beneath his teeth, he fumbled for a pack of matches, then dropped them on the ground. It was as Nick bent down to retrieve the matches, just a shade too slow to beat Schanke, that he saw the figure in the shadows.

There was no time to give an alarm. The silhouette slammed into Schanke, knocking him full on the ground, the attacker slipping the gun from the detective's holster. Nick pulled his own gun, shouting, "Police! Freeze!"

But as the figure half-rose, gun still pointed at Schanke, the glare of one of the safety lights fell across the face.

LaCroix.

"Drop it," said LaCroix, staring into Nick's eyes. "Or I shoot."

Schanke had half-flipped on the ground, but he was in a bad position—the muzzle was too close to his heart. One of the wood-shrapnel bullets would end his night life . . . permanently.

Fanning the fingers on his free hand, Nick very carefully put the gun on the ground, holding the grip with two fingers. As soon as he moved, the access door they been sent to guard opened outward. It was a perfect move by LaCroix—no one in the police knew of their association. They were assured safe passage because Nick was there and Nick would be cleared of negligence or wrong-doing by any police inquiry board, mortal or vampire.

At least ten figures escaped into the shadows of the alley. Blinded by the glare of the safety light, Nick could make out nothing more than silhouettes, as they slipped away. Schanke, of course, with his vampire eyes, would hold the memory of their faces clear and cold until he could identify them from mugshots, then a line-up.

That's when Nick realized that LaCroix had no intentions of leaving Schanke whatever vestiges of life he had left.

The others were gone, having moved out into the street and away, perhaps even blending into the crowd waiting for the opening. Nick guessed that the uniformed mortals at the alley mouth were LaCroix's people, having replaced the vampires sent to guard the area. There *would* be no witnesses, if LaCroix had his way.

But Nick wasn't about to allow that. Picking up his gun, he nodded toward the mouth of the alley. "Go."

In the half-light, he saw LaCroix's eyes narrow. "Don't be a fool, Nicholas," he hissed. "It's perfect. One less of them and you come out a hero."

As if testing the balance of the weapon, he lifted the gun . . . and pointed it at LaCroix. "He's my partner. I won't let you kill him."

"You'll be killing yourself, then. He's *seen* them, for God's sake." He spat down at the ground, near Schanke, who was watching the discussion with wide eyes. "How long before they track us down? But you won't be here for that, will you—?"

Before Nick could blink, Schanke moved. He was nothing more than a blur of motion, a leg scissoring out to knock LaCroix off-balance. When LaCroix went down, Schanke scrambled to his feet. The gun hit

the ground, skittering on the tar, into the darkness.

Having fallen on his hands, LaCroix avoided Schanke's grasp. Nick knew he couldn't let his partner get his hands on LaCroix—the vampire's strength along could crush him. He fired, trusting Schanke's vampire reflexes to save him from harm.

It was close enough to get Schanke's attention. His partner froze in place, then turned his head to look at Nick. Eyes glowed gold. "Nick?"

"Let him go." Taking a step forward, he nodded toward the alley mouth again. "Get out!" he shouted to LaCroix.

Neither of them moved. "Don't do this," whispered Schanke, meeting his gaze. "Nick, don't throw it all away for one of *them*."

"One of *us*," LaCroix corrected, his voice triumphant. "He's one of mine, blood-sucker. He's flesh and blood and living. And he's finally figured out it's us against them."

Schanke shifted position, but Nick was suddenly aware, suddenly able to match the vampire's speed—again, his mortal reflxes and senses seemed augmented, almost as if he'd been turned. But now wasn't the time to question the brief transformation. His next shot went through Schanke's suit coat. He almost couldn't bear the oh-so-human look in his partner's eyes, before they hardened to something like steel. "It's not 'them or us,' said Nick softly. "It's you . . . or him. Don't make me decide, Schanke."

LaCroix had started up the alley, his hand outstretched. "Nick, come on! There's no time—"

But he stood his ground. If he moved, Schanke would move, and LaCroix would be dead. "Go!" he shouted, letting the rage fill his voice, so that his own ears were deafened with the roar. "Go!"

That's when Schanke moved.

The gun went off, the sound of the explosion echoing in the enclosed alley. Whatever grace had allowed Nick his earlier reaction time and heightened eyesight had left him. Distantly, he heard the sound of LaCroix's footsteps as he ran from the alley, then the brush of cloth and flesh against the brick, then tar. Schanke spun into the wall, then hit the ground.

For an instant, Nick forze. When he holstered the gun, the movement was automatic; his hands knew the drill and followed it to the letter. His feet feeling like lead, Nick walked over to his partner. He reached down his hand, to turn him over.

Schanke's left arm shot upward, the hand grabbing his throat and holding him there. He could see the bloody stain that seeped through Schanke's shirt and suitcoat, above the heart. Far enough *above* the heart.

"Next time, aim lower . . . partner," hissed Schanke. He scrambled to his feet, never relinquishing his grip on Nick's throat.

The flash of light behind them was blinding, followed less than a second later by the sound of an explosion that could have presaged the destruction of the world. Tongues of fire rose high into the sky, singing the clouds. Brick, stone, and metal fragments flew through the air aimlessly like birds, arcing and falling where they would. The sudden wind was hot, carrying the stench of heat, blood, and death.

Like some great timpani, the peals of man-made thunder followed one upon another. There was none so loud or so long before another sounded behind it, filling the sky with a burst of angry sound.

The force of an explosion blew Nick out the mouth of the alley, into the street, and into the facade of a facing building. For a moment he was aware only of an empty silence, there being no air to breathe, and a pressure trying to push him flat against the stone wall. Then sound returned and with it came the crackle of flame and the fall of debris. A pain in his ear told him that one of his eardrums had probably

been punctured. His hands searched and found mortar cracks in the stone wall, his fingers fighting for purchase, as he slid to the ground. Eventually, he lost that battle, falling, leaving a trail of blood on the pale stone from the scratches on his face. Eyes open, he stared at the night sky and wondered if he was dead, his lungs heaving for air, but not finding any.

But then the air returned. After a few labored breaths, he managed to turn over and closed his eyes, resting gratefully. He'd only had the breath knocked out of him—a frightening experience, but hardly fatal.

And that's when he realized that the sounds had changed.

Screams filled the air—vampire and mortal. Sirens and lights and shouted orders, obeyed by . . . who? Shadows darted through the smoke-filled streets. And behind it all, the artificial blood plant burned, adding angry red fury and the smell of charred blood to the hot and dangerous night.

Nick made his way to his feet, leaning heavily against the wall. The ache in his ear was already starting to fade and he could almost feel the scratches on his face knitting together, the blood absorbed into his skin. How this could be, he didn't know, nor did he care. He was only glad to be alive, with the remnants of his shirt and suit jacket clinging to his back.

What was left of the alley was engulfed in a sheet of flame. The sudden surge of joy and life left him as he stared through the smoke, across the street, at the inferno. His steps were slow, but he could only go so far before the fire drove him back. There was no sign of Schanke. And if his partner hadn't been blown free . . . fire was among the ways to destroy a vampire.

Nick stared at the fire, then turned his head, unable to look at at the flames, his eyes tearing . . . it was the smoke. And then he started to run toward what he'd seen, in that brief refusal to meet the gaze of his personal tragedy.

The area at the front of the plant—where the police had gathered behind the podium, where the vampire leaders had waited for their chance for popular immortality, where the crowds had jostled and pushed to be closer to the front—looked like a war zone. If the club bombing had been a massacre, this looked like the floor of a charnel house. Only now there were mortals and vampire survivors among the wreckage. And they wouldn't survive long if they didn't get help.

Anesthetized by the sights and sounds, Nick forced his way through the tide of refugees and rescuers, moving back to Schanke's car. With a slap of the flat of his hand in the right place, the trunk flew open. He grabbed whatever first-aid gear he found, then left the open trunk behind him. As he ran, Nick dropped first-aid supplies to whatever good Samaritans he passed, hoping against hope that other police were doing the same. The sirens he had heard were the emergency personnel, but they'd be overwhelmed by the casualties. There were simply too many to deal with.

A scream to his right caught his attention—two mortals were trying to lift a boulder sized chunk of stone from a uniformed officer. He joined them, lending his strength to the task. They managed to push the stone far enough off the woman to pull her out.

It was the duty officer, her red hair darkened and matted with blood. Her eyes were barely open, but they glowed gold. Her fangs were extended, reacting to the scent of her own blood. The mortals stepped back in horror, but Nick merely glanced over her. She'd heal, in time. She needed blood, but not desperately.

Dismissing her case as less urgent than others, he rose to his feet and turned, only to face a mortal who held a long piece of wood, his intention obvious. Nick grabbed either end of the wood, standing in front of the downed officer. "Are you insane?" he cried, pushing against the other man's strength. "For God's sake, go help someone. There are people *dying* here."

"Stinking vampire lover," the man spat, putting his weight behind the wood.

"Stinking *cop*," Nick corrected. Pushing the man back, he reached for his holster and found that, somehow, his gun had remained with him and hadn't discharged. Drawing the weapon, he waved the man away. "Get out of here."

The man hesitated only a moment before turning on his heels and running into the smoke. Nick holstered the weapon and looked to the other man. "Could you watch her?" he asked.

"Uh, sure," answered the man. His eyes were glazed, as if he were still stunned, but he nodded, looking down at the vampire. "She needs blood, right?"

"Yeah, but don't donate any. Wait for the medics." Passing close to the man, he added quietly, "And for God's sake, don't get to close to her. She's in pain and she's *hungry*."

The man paled, but nodded again. As an afterthought, Nick paused and handed him his gun. "For them," he said, gesturing toward the place where the attacker had disappeared. Then he looked away. "Or her, if she starts for you."

He didn't wait to hear the man's reaction to that one. Nor did he stop moving. It didn't matter whether they were vampire or mortal . . . he needed to save as many of them as he could. At first he worked alone, then beside other mortals—he chased away the vampires, stressing the need to look after their own and the danger they posed to themselves and the victims, being so close to mortal blood. The club bombing had taught him that much. And most had agreed, staring at him with gold or red eyes and moving off. There were vampires scavengers, of course, feeding off whatever human victims they could find, but he let the other vampires take care of them. This was a place for saving life, not taking it. Both vampires and mortals came together for those few hours, working against the clock and the elements and their own despair. Some lives were saved.

But many had been lost. Holding the palm of his hand against a woman's arm that had been severed at the elbow, he met the eyes of the EMT who was working on her. The man shook his head after a second, then leaned forward to remove Nick's pressure from the wound. After a brief spurt, there was nothing. The heart had stopped pumping. The woman was dead.

"She's gone," said the man softly. Pulling a white cloth from his case, he ripped it in two and placed a piece across the woman's face, marking her so that the other emergency personnel wouldn't waste their time. He gave the other half to Nick, then slipped the strap of his emergency bag over his arm and moved on, to another victim.

Nick took the cloth numbly and wiped the blood from his hands, his eyes still fixed on the face beneath the white cloth. It was no one he knew. No one he'd ever met. Just another mortal. Just another dead woman.

Rage and sorrow battled equally in his heart. He wanted to throw back his head and scream, as so many others were doing in that place. But there would be time for that later. He'd failed to protect them. All he could do now was serve, save those he could and, later, mourn those who'd passed beyond any mortal help.

His hands were grabbed from behind and he heard the sound of cuffs snapping into place—what they were registering just after the cold metal bound his wrists. With a start, Nick turned, nearly falling.

Schanke's hand caught his elbow, steadying him. A large gash on the vampire's cheek was healing and he'd seemed to have regained some of the use of his right arm, where the bullet had passed through, but not shattered on impact, as it should have. His lips were set in a grim line, as he said, "Let's go, partner."

Nick pulled back from the grip on his elbow. "Schanke, not now. There are people out here who need

help. Let me loose. Follow me if you want. When this is over, I'll go anywhere with you. But they need every pair of hands they can get."

But Schanke's eyes burned gold. "Mortal hands?" he asked, with a snarl. "Or *immortal* hands?"

When Schanke jerked on his elbow again, Nick nearly fell. But he resigned himself to his fate—there was no way Schanke would listen to common sense. They moved through and over the rubble, back toward the area where they'd left the car. Nick was astonished at how widespread the devastation was and how far he'd moved into it. He tried to keep his eyes ahead, looking down only to keep from stumbling over debris. Schanke kept pushing him forward, using no more force than was necessary. His partner was uncharacteristically silent . . . and Nick was just as glad he didn't have to make conversation.

But then he saw an outstretched hand just to the left of his path. Something caught in his throat and he dug in his heels. Schanke tried to punch him forward, but he couldn't move, mesmerized by the delicate fingers of a woman, the flesh colored nails. He took a step toward the body, but the face was covered with a white cloth. Again, Schanke tried to pull him.

"Please, let me see," he whispered, almost choking on the lump in his throat.

"Come on—"

"I think it might—I have to *know*."

He looked back at Schanke. The vampire's eyes met his and some of the gold lessened, as the glance traveled down to the body half-buried in the rubble, then back to his own. After a brief pause, the vampire nodded. With more care, Schanke guided him up a ridge of stone and twisted metal then, when they reached the corpse, lifted the edge of the cloth from the face, with two fingers.

If Janette hadn't died easily, he wouldn't have known from her expression. She looked so much like she had when he'd left her sleeping that evening that he had to fight the urge to jostle her awake. Her eyelids were closed, her lips parted slightly, as if she were about to take a breath. Taking a step forward, he dropped to his knees, ignoring the jolt to his muscles as he landed on the hard stone. Closing his eyes, he tried to remember her last words to him, but only whispers and soft sounds swam in his memory, her laughter among them. There were no tears burning at the corner of his eyes, but he felt his heart break within him, leaving a void so dark and so wide, he doubted it could ever be mended.

After a moment that seemed like eternity, he felt the pressure of Schanke's hand on his shoulder, insistent, but not brutal. "We have to go now. Nick . . . it's time to go."

He turned his head away, unable to stare at her any longer. "Schanke, do me a favor. Cover her face again."

The vampire paused, then leaned past him and replaced the edge of the white cloth. Only then, when she was just another anonymous victim, could he look at her again.

But the ache in his heart didn't lessen. And the void was as dark and as deep as it could ever be.

During the rest of the trip back to the car, nothing could reach past the numb feeling that had engulfed his soul. He knew that Schanke said something, said many things . . . . but the words and their meaning escaped him. It was only as they reached a patrol car and he leaned against the warm metal that some sense of reality began to return to him.

Schanke glanced at him, past him, speaking with a uniformed officer. "Take him back to the station and have him booked."

The officer stared at Nick, then looked away. "What charge?"

"Attempted murder of a fellow officer. For starters." Schanke looked at him again and, for a second, Nick was certain he saw something mortal warring within those hard vampire eyes. But the dark steel

returned again and Schanke turned away, walking back into the smoke and dust of the still-settling debris.

"—Just take him downtown and book him," said the officer's voice. "We don't need any more hassles—"

Before Nick could move, a hand grasped the hair on the back of his head. His eyes met those of Art, one of the two vampire patrolmen who had jumped him at the apartment building. The sudden fear at the memory of the fangs against his throat must have shown in his eyes, because the vampire grinned, snarling, "Don't worry, pretty boy. I don't turn jailbirds."

"But you turn my stomach," he snapped.

He realized it was a stupid thing to say, just before the vampire slammed his head against the side of the patrol car and the flashing red lights and sirens faded into oblivion.

The first thing Nick realized was that his mouth was open, a scream still echoing in his throat. He shut it, finding himself standing over the booth table. It had been flipped onto its side, the ashtray shattered on the floor.

It was the first time he'd ever seen the Raven at a complete halt. Even the music was silent, the dancers like stone beneath the flickering lights, staring at him. Only their whispers and curious stares broke the tableau.

Then Janette moved before them, arms akimbo, her lips set in a sharp frown. "Nicola!"

He vaulted the table and took her in his arms, kissing her full on the mouth. Joy raced through him at the sight of her, living . . . if not breathing. That—and only that—mattered.

Until she bit his lip and shoved him away with so much force, he fell against another table. It shifted in place and it fell with him, showering himself and the patrons at the table with a variety of liquids. Glass crashed to the hard floor, shattering around him.

Wiping the blood from his lip with his shirt sleeve, he smiled. He didn't care. Janette *wasn't* dead.

Janette didn't seem to share his enthusiasm. Stalking over to him, her heels clicking on the floor, she reached down and grabbed hold of his shift front. With one hand, she lifted him to his feet. "What *is* your problem tonight?! You manhandle *me*? Then you disrupt my club?" Forcing a smile, she nodded toward the other patrons, then turned on him again. "You're going to cost me a small fortune in free drinks!"

Nick put his hand to the floor and pushed himself up to his feet, then pulled back quickly, cut by a fragment from a glass. More cautious, he staggered upright, but couldn't wipe the stupid grin he felt had plastered itself to his face. "You're alive," he whispered.

"Well, you're going to wish you'd stayed dead, after I've gotten through with you." She took two more steps toward him, then shrugged. "Why do I bother?" Glancing toward the door, she snapped her fingers, then pointed toward him. "If you value your skin, don't come back for a while. At least a decade . . . I may have forgiven you by then."

Nick took a step toward her, but she turned her back on him and walked away. Then a hand fell on his shoulder. "Come on, Nick. Janette wants you out of here."

It was the bouncer. When Nick didn't move immediately, his grip tightened and he pushed Nick in the direction of the door.

Anger flared inside. He'd been pushed around by too many vampires. Needing to strike out, Nick aimed a fist for the bouncer's jaw.

That turned out to be a mistake. The bouncer easily ducked the punch, then landed one in Nick's

mid-section. He flew back, trashing another table, but wasn't as quick to rise this time, having had the wind knocked out of him. Gasping, he rested on the floor on his knees and wrapped his arms around his stomach, doubled over. Unceremoniously, Nick was hauled to his feet by the back of his shirt and marched to the door.

He wasn't thrown out—not as such—but the force the bouncer used was just enough to send him sailing into a mound of rock hard snow that had been piled up by the street plow. Bruised, aching, and only half-aware of what was going on, Nick slid down the slope of the snow and landed on his tailbone at the bottom. He was struggling to his feet when his jacket sailed out the door after him, his keys skidding across the icy concrete walk in front of the club.

The cold was the first thing to make sense. Shivering violently, Nick struggled into his coat, zipping and buttoning every flap he could find. The cold *still* seemed to reach him. He stared down at his hands—they were red and shaking. He stumbled across the ice, nearly sliding again, and retrieved his keys. They fell out of his hands twice before he managed to drop them into his coat pocket. Then he walked back across the icy walk to his car. Losing his balance on a slick patch, he fell and slid, slamming his shoulder into the caddy's side door.

For a moment, he sat there. With each breath he took, the chilled air snuck into his lungs, making him shiver. Nick tucked his hands into his pockets, one hand clutching the car keys. The other hand clutched something small and hard.

He held the wicker doll on his palm, its features barely visible in the dim lights outside the Raven. But he didn't need to see it to know that the other arm had folded in on itself.

Leaning against his car, sitting in the snow, he drew his knees to his chest, the doll clutched in his hand. It had been another dream. But why did he still feel that wound in his heart, from Janette's death? Janette was alive . . . more or less. She didn't know what he'd dreamed, what he'd been through. Nor would she care.

Nick closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the car, still shivering. Would she care when *he* was dead? Would *any* of them care?

"Self-pity doesn't become you, Detective Knight. But then, it's not very attractive on anyone."

His eyes shot open. At first, he couldn't see anything more than the outline of a figure, silhouetted against the dim lights. But as he stared at her, the features came into focus—a Asian cast to the face, with violet, almond-shaped eyes and hair as dark and shiny as a raven's wing. There was a black cloak with a hood, seemingly there for appearance's sake, because it did little to protect her from the cold. And though her dress was sheer, periwinkle, and lilac, and violet, leaving her midriff bare and nothing to the imagination, she never shivered or showed any acknowledgment of the below-freezing temperatures or the chill wind that threatened to cut him like a knife.

Although he'd never met her, he knew who she was. Natalie's description, evocative as it had been, hadn't done her justice.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked.

The briefest smile traced the outline of her ruby lips. "*I*? I've done nothing. I only advise. You contacted *me*, Detective Knight." The smile fell, forming a grim line. "You asked for a dream doll. I advised against it, but you asked again . . . demanded, in fact. I delivered only what you asked."

Another gust of wind swept around the car and Nick shivered. He tucked his hands beneath his armpits, in an attempt to stay warm. "But I didn't know . . . ."

"You never do." A sad smile accompanied her words. Stepping forward, she offered him her hand.

Reaching up, he took it, using it, and the car beside him, to reach his feet. And while he held her hand, the wind and the cold seemed to avoid him. The fingers that folded over his were long and thin and smooth, the nails hard and lacquered in the same shifting color as her gown.

"One would think you'd have learned by now," she said softly, her gaze falling to the palm he had cut with the fragments of glass. "Eight hundred years ago you lost your mortality by not asking questions. Do you think to regain it the same way, stumbling blindly after every glimmer of light?" There was something sharper in her gaze as she met his eyes. "Or was that first merely a 'bad decision'?"

He pulled his hand from her grasp as his heard the words. Straightening, he stared into the violet eyes. "You know too much."

"And you know too little . . . about yourself." Her smile was frank and even as she met his gaze—she wasn't about to be cowed by threats or mesmerized into submission.

"I know too little about *this*." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the doll. "I have one dream left. And then?"

The lacquered fingernails reached out, stroking the doll in the palm of his hand, but not taking it from him. "You tell me. They're *your* dreams."

"But are they really dreams? They're too detailed, too realistic . . . and I know they're not memories."

Abandoning the doll, she clasped her hands together. "One man's memories are another man's dreams."

"A man?" asked Nick, his fingers closing over the doll. "Or . . . a mortal?"

"Oh, let's not play games with words," she sighed. Shaking her head, she took a step through the snow and seated herself on the hood of his car.

Normally, Nick would wince at such familiarity with his prized auto. Now, he simply shrugged and leaned forward. "Why did you come here?"

"To advise you." That amused smile reappeared. "You seemed . . . confused."

He couldn't argue with that. "So, what do you advise?"

She pursed her lips and, for a moment, he thought he saw her legs kicking back and forth against the car beneath the silken veils of her dress, in an impatient gesture. "If I speak, will you *listen* this time?"

There was the slightest threat in the tone of her voice that got under his skin. But Nick swallowed his pride and nodded. "Yes."

Taking his closed fist in her hands, she met his gaze. "Share what you've been given with no one. And dream the last dream."

Nick stared at her. "But . . . I'll die."

Releasing his hand, she hopped from the hood of the car and turned her back to him. "Detective Knight, your arrogance knows no bounds. I can do nothing for you."

"Wait!" He reached out the hand that held the doll, as if to touch her, but drew it back when she glanced over her shoulder, violet eyes flashing angrily. "I . . . apologize. I *did* say I'd take your advice. But . . . at least tell me what's going to happen?"

Rolling her eyes, she looked up at the night sky, as if beseeching some external power for patience. "First you ignore me. Then you treat me like a common fortune teller." Shaking her head in dismay, she turned disappointed eyes to him. "I told you, *chevalier*, it's *your* dream. *You* must live it."

"And then?" he pressed.

"And then you'll know if you have the strength to pursue your heart's desire. And what that truly is." The hard cast of her lips softened and she reached out her fingers, touching his cold hand. "That's all I can tell you."

Nick stared at her, his heart sinking inside him. "It isn't enough."

"It will have to be enough . . . for now." She reached up to touch his face with her hand and smiled sadly. Then she turned and stepped away, through the snow, to the icy walk.

Nick opened his clenched fist, staring down at the dream doll. When he looked up, she was gone, disappearing in the darkness. She'd left no footprint in the hard crust of the snow. Only his own floundering marks could be seen.

His heart heavy, Nick dropped the dream doll back into his pocket and pulled out his keys. The car door resisted him, frozen shut, but it gave after a few tugs, a *very* small dent, and some swearing. He sat inside with the heater running on full blast for ten minutes before he could keep his hands from shaking off the frozen steering wheel.

During the drive back to the loft, he did no better. Nick was tired beyond belief . . . eight centuries of tired. He'd begun to question whether he'd even want to be mortal, after the past few days of meaningless death upon meaningless death. And what would happen if he became mortal? It had been his vampire abilities of flight and speed and senses and invulnerability that had solved cases and saved mortals. Schanke—and even Natalie—owed their lives to the fact that he was a vampire. If all he wanted to do was save mortals, he couldn't *be* mortal. And even then, he couldn't save mortals from themselves or each other.

He wanted more than a legacy of heroism for himself. But was being mortal worth all the heartache and anguish he'd endured—and *would* endure—searching for a way back across?

Chapter 5

He was part of my dream, of course—
But then I was part of his Dream, too.

Nick thought he'd never be warm again. He huddled in one corner of the elevator up to the loft. Once the doors opened, he stumbled across the room and fell onto the couch. His hands, his cheeks, his ears, all of his exposed skin felt like it was being pricked by tiny needles. His body ached from his falls on the ice and he felt thoroughly miserable. If he was going to die, it had better be soon, or he was liable to kill himself just to end the constant aches and pains.

He heard the elevator door open, but couldn't be bothered stirring himself, having found some bit of warmth huddled into a ball on the couch.

"Nick?"

Natalie's voice held a measure of panic. That and that alone could have moved him. He waved a hand and said, "Here."

Even to his ears, he sounded pitiful. "I saw you go in and I called—I guess you didn't hear—" Still peeling off her gloves, Natalie dropped a paper sack onto the coffee table and stared at him. "What happened?" She paused long enough to shrug off her coat, but left it on the floor as she bent over him. She touched the back of her hand to his cheek, then pulled away. "My God, you're frozen!"

"I had another dream," he muttered, hiding his head beneath his arm. "Nat, I think I'm dying. At least, I hope I am."

"You're just cold," she scolded, but there was an uncertainty in her tone that unnerved him. "Come on, get up." Reaching out, she pushed his shoulder, then pulled her hand back, wiping it on her sweat pants. "Your jacket's all wet."

Responding to her bullying, Nick sat up, but in concession to how lousy he felt, he draped himself over the arm of the couch. "I got thrown out of the Raven."

"And you've cut your hand—?"

"Part of the reason I was thrown out." Meeting her curious gaze for an instant, he shook his head and fell back against the arm of the couch again. "It's a long story."

"It explains why Janette hung up on me when I called to ask if you were there. Let me see your hand." She took his hand in hers. "Nick, you've still got glass in here. And how . . . ."

Her voice trailed off. When she remained quiet, he glanced back at her. His hand rested in hers, but her other hand was loosely fastened around his wrist, her eyes on her wristwatch.

"What?" he asked, trying to pull his hand back.

"Stop." She slapped his wrist. "You've made me lose count. Be quiet."

Frowning, he let his head fall back to the black couch cover and closed his eyes. The least she could offer was a little sympathy. It wasn't every day things like this happened to him. In fact, things like this *never* happened to him. How was he ever going to live down being thrown out of the Raven? Sure, Janette didn't want to see him for a couple of years, but more likely a decade would pass before *he'd* get up the nerve to go back there.

His lip was still tender where she'd bitten it. He touched the spot lightly with his tongue. It wasn't the first time Janette had bitten his lips, but they'd always healed quickly. Why was it so sore?

"I can't believe it," muttered Natalie.

He opened his eyes and dared another look at her. Dropping his wrist, she held up one finger. "Just one more thing."

"Nat—?"

"Bear with me. And stop whining." Kneeling beside the couch, she leaned over and placed her ear against his chest.

"Is this supposed to help?" he asked, then chided himself for protesting. She was warm—he wanted to wrap his arms around her and hold her until he could absorb some of her heat.

"Ssssh!" After a moment, she looked up at him, eyes narrowing. "Take a deep breath and hold it."

"This is silly."

Slapping a hand against his chest, she commanded, "Do it!"

Nick took a deep breath, releasing it as she lowered her hand.

"Again."

This time, she sat back on her heels, staring at him. Nick frowned. "What? "

Shaking her head, Natalie rose to her feet and walked away. "It *does* make sense, in a weird sort of way. Blood makes you nauseous. You're cold—like any idiot knows enough to wear gloves when it's thirty degrees below, never mind the wind chill. Damned lucky you haven't gotten frostbite . . . ."

"*What*?" The chill was starting to leave him. Nick sat up on the couch, then rose to his feet when she wouldn't turn to face him. A shiver ran through him at the thought of what she could *not* be telling him. "Nat? What's happening to me?"

She still wouldn't turn. "You *don't* know, do you?"

Standing behind her, he put his hand on her shoulder. "No, I don't. Unless you tell me."

There were tears in her eyes when she turned. Reaching up to touch one of his hands, she whispered, "You're mortal."

It took a second for the words to register—fear had tightened around his soul when he'd seen her tears and he was prepared for an entirely different verdict. "No," he answered automatically, believing that his ears were playing tricks on him.

She squeezed his hand, the one he'd cut on the glass. Wincing, Nick pulled it quickly from her shoulder, cradling it protectively against himself. "Oh, Nick, I'm sorry—" Half-laughing, she reached for his hand, but he stepped back from her.

Nick looked around the loft. "It can't be true," he whispered, half to himself. "It can't—" But he looked down at his hand, which was still bleeding. She was right, he could see two fragments of glass sparkling in the cuts.

"It's *true*," said Natalie. "That's why you felt the cold—your body temperature is a healthy ninety-eight point six. Your pulse is normal, your heartbeat regular, Nick—you're *breathing*." She stood beside him and touched the side of his face. "You're even bruising."

"I fell on the ice," he said absently, still not comprehending what she was saying.

"That's why you've been feeling lousy, your body was getting up to speed. It would have taken time for the blood to warm, for the heartbeat to speed up . . . ."

"I'm still tired."

"You haven't slept."

"And . . . hungry."

"You haven't eaten." When he turned toward her with a questioning glance, she shrugged. "I don't know *how*. But it's happened."

"The doll." Reaching into his coat pocket, he withdrew the wicker doll. The arms were still folded tightly, as were the legs. Nick stared at it, wondering if she was right.

"No," answered Natalie quickly. "That's too . . .weird. Like spells, or magic or—"

"Vampires?" he asked softly.

When he looked at her, she was smiling shyly. "I guess. It's supposed to give you your heart's desire, right?"

His eyes went back to the doll. "That's what she said."

"Who?"

"Your friend from Greenwich Village."

"She's *your* friend—" Natalie's tone took on a suspicious cast. "I thought you said you'd never spoken to her?"

"I hadn't, before tonight." The doll *looked* the same. There was no change in the expression. And a light touch against the folded limbs proved they were as immovable as before.

Natalie put a hand on his arm, getting his attention. "You *saw* her? *Here*?"

"Outside the Raven." He looked back at the doll again.

"And she came all the way from New York to see you. Outside the Raven?"

"She has her own way of traveling." Nick smiled to himself—he didn't quite understand who or what she was, exactly. But sometimes it was better not to question those things. "She gave me some advice."

"Which was?" pressed Natalie.

"Dream the last dream." He moved his hand toward Natalie and she took a step back when her eyes fell on the doll. "I've had four dreams. There's only one left. I thought she was telling me that I was going to die. Instead . . . I'm alive."

He closed his hand over the doll, feeling the scratchy wicker against his palm. Then he looked at Natalie, still not quite believing, needing her confirmation. "I *am* alive? Mortal?"

"I wouldn't test it with a knife or a noose, but . . . yeah."

The tears still sparkled at the corner of his eyes. Nick opened his hand and the doll dropped to the table, forgotten. He placed his hands on Natalie's shoulders and hugged her tightly, lifting her feet from the ground . . . with the strength of a mortal man. He wouldn't have to worry about crushing her, killing her with a hug or an embrace.

Her arms fell around his neck, holding on for dear life. "Nick!"

As he lowered her to the ground, Nick leaned forward, brushing his lips against hers lightly. Natalie's eyes were wide as he pulled back, then she pushed forward, her mouth covering his. The warmth he'd been willing to kill for was in his arms. Cradling her face with his hands, he kissed her eyelids, down along the line of her neck—

And images flashed again—of sun-bronzed skin, unblemished and smooth beneath his hands and lips, then turning cold and pale, buried beneath rock and stone and metal shards.

He turned away, releasing her, his heart torn asunder by the momentary vision. Nick closed his eyes, willing away the image of that other Janette, but that gave way to an image of a Natalie of darkness, with sharp eyes and an even sharper smile. He started as her hand touched his shoulder.

"Nick?"

"The dreams," he said, around the lump in his throat. "I don't know what's real any more. I kiss you and I see Janette."

Her hand fell from his shoulder. "I may be wrong, but I think you're really out of practice—"

The annoyance in her tone got through to him. Nick turned his head, meeting her gaze. "In my *dreams*, Nat. I told you, I'm someone else there." Running his hand through his hair, he walked away from her. "Janette and I were mortals. We were . . . lovers. But not in love. I loved you—" He stopped in his tracks, realizing what he'd just said, then added quickly, "in the *dream*. But you were a vampire. There was no way I was going to cross, even for you. And then, Janette died . . . ."

The ache was there, more real than he could bear. He turned to look at Natalie, wanting her to understand, but not having the words to explain what he felt. "There seems to be some weird sort of parallel; vampire and mortal, Janette and I, you and I. She died in the dream, so does that mean that you'll die here? Am I going to kill you, just like I ended up killing her?" The name came to mind for the knot in his stomach—fear. He could too easily imagine himself with fangs, tearing into Natalie's flesh, unable to stop himself, overcome with passion and bloodlust. "It can't happen. I *won't* let it happen."

He almost thought Natalie was going to grab her coat and walk out the door—her eyes definitely moved in that direction. And some small part of him wished desperately that she would do just that and take this decision out of his hands.

Instead, she took a step toward him, her lips set in a grim line. "Let's take care of first things first, shall we? Sit."

"But—"

"Sit," she commanded, pointing to the couch. Then, as he sat down, she moved back to the kitchen and returned with her medical bag. Seating herself beside him, she dropped the bag on the table, her manner suddenly completely and utterly professional. Opening the bag, she withdrew a small zippered pouch, which unfolded on the table, revealing a number of sharp instruments. Natalie picked up a pair of tweezers, pulled a small antiseptic pad out of a package and wiped off the metal ends, then turned her attention to him again. Her palm held outward, she said, "Hand?"

He hesitated, meeting that professional stare. "It's not *that* bad—"

Without warning, she grabbed his hand and held it flat, wiping an antiseptic pad across it lightly. "If you're going to be mortal, you're going to have to get used to getting scraped and cut and bloodied and bruised and battered . . . inside and out. Consider this lesson one."

Nick bit down on his lip as she pried the tweezers into the cut on his hand, extracting the first, then the second piece of glass. In between the stabs of pain, he peered over her hands, fascinated, as small droplets of blood swelled around the cut.

"Light, please," said Natalie sharply, reaching for another antiseptic pad. He leaned back with a grimace, giving her all the light she needed. The pad stung as it swiped over the open cut. Then she released his hand.

It was still bleeding. Nick absently raised the palm of his hand to his mouth, but Natalie glared at him and grabbed the hand back.

"*No* backsliding. Don't be such a baby, I'm almost done." She tore open the package of a small, round adhesive bandage and placed it over the cut. Her sleeve slipped back and he looked away, after noticing the bruise on her wrist—he'd held her arm too tightly when he'd tried to stop her from touching the dream doll.

"There." Natalie held his hand in hers and he looked back at her, then down at her wrist. Following

the gaze, she quickly released his hand and tugged her sleeve down over the blue and black mark.

"I'm sorry."

Her eyes met his and she smiled. "Don't be. It can't happen any more, Nick. You're *mortal*."

Nick rose from the couch and moved away, looking down at the Band-Aid on his palm. "It's . . . going to take some getting used to."

"And you're going to have to get yourself a *real* doctor, instead of relying on your friendly local coroner." When he looked back, she was throwing things into her bag. "You're going to need food. And sleep." She looked up at him, frowning. "Lots of sleep. I worked out a couple of ideas for sedatives—but they were vampire strength. Right now I think a glass of warm milk would set you up for a good eight hours."

"No. No sleep." He walked to the fireplace, resting his bandaged hand against it, finding the stone cold against his warming skin. "I still have one dream left." For a moment, he stared at her, matching her against the dream image, the vampire Natalie that his dream self found so compelling . . . and that he found lacking. How could she compare to this Natalie, *his* Natalie?

She rose to her feet. "I guess I'd better be going."

"Why?" He walked over to her, took her hands in his, albeit favoring his bandaged palm. "Natalie—I'm *mortal*."

"I know." There was still a shimmer of joyful tears in the corners of her eyes, until she looked away. "But you should get some sleep."

"I don't *want* to sleep. I'll only . . . I'll only dream again." Nick took a deep breath, a small shiver stealing down his spine. Impulsively, he pressed her knuckles to his lips. "I want you to be here if I do. Stay with me. Talk with me."

Natalie pulled her hands away. "Dreams can be good things . . . sometimes. And, you don't need me . Not now."

"Of course I *need* you." He walked past her, around her, staring in surprise. "You brought me back across. I got what I wanted. I'm *mortal*."

"Yeah." She nodded, ever so slightly. "Do you remember, in the museum? When you said you wanted to be mortal?"

He looked away, quickly. It had been after he'd destroyed LaCroix, after Alyce had died . . . and he'd wanted to slip away himself, into the darkness. But Natalie had brought him back, given him blood—Schanke's blood, of all things. They'd stared at the cup in the glass case, the cup he'd provided from his own collection, to replace the one LaCroix had let shatter on the floor of the abattoir. And he'd talked about being mortal, about being able to *live* again, *love* again . . . .

A lump rose in his throat and he found he couldn't meet her eyes. To . . . love? Natalie had made such a difference in him, when he was a vampire. There could never have been anything between them, besides friendship. To love something or someone meant damnation or destruction—he'd learned that quickly enough, as the centuries passed. But, as a mortal . . . everything had changed. It was *possible*.

He looked at her, remembering only a moment before when he'd been so filled with elation and joy that he'd taken her into his arms, kissed her eyelids and down her neck. And, as if sensing his thoughts, Natalie smiled. She *hadn't* pulled away when he'd kissed her.

But what happened if he wasn't *really* mortal? What happened if his kisses turned deadly?

It threatened to tear him apart, having her so close, almost in his arms, yet that fear still held him in place, motionless. Nick licked his lips, finding his mouth was dry. "I remember. I remember it very well.

I meant everything I said. But . . . I want—"

"What about what *I* want? You're taking an awful lot for granted. I have a choice in this, too. Or haven't you thought about that?" Before he could move, she stepped up to him, wrapped her arms around him again, and kissed him full on the lips.

It was a moment before they parted. Nick stared into her eyes, knowing that she'd taken the decision from him, but not in the way he'd expected. Or in the manner that would keep her safe. "She wouldn't tell your fortune," he whispered, some small knot of terror still remaining, closed around his heart.

"What was she going to say—that I'd meet someone tall, dark, and handsome?" Natalie smiled impishly and added, "She'd have been wrong."

"Not completely," he chided, touching her nose with his finger and matching her smile. Then his smile faded, as he traced the line of her jaw with the tips of his fingers, as if discovering it for the first time. "But if we're wrong—"

"If we're *wrong*?" Natalie caught his hand with hers and touched it to her lips. "Nick, you say you've been living in dreams. Well, what if this is *your dream? Our* dream? Your heart's desire . . . ."

"Mortal heart," he answered, kissing her between the words, down the line of her neck, "mortal blood," pushing aside the loose sweatsuit top to press his lips to her shoulder, "mortal flesh."

Natalie slipped out from beneath his kiss and caress, trailing her hand lightly across his cheek before fleeing toward the stairway. He raced after her, nearly pausing when he realized that the pounding in his ears was his heart, pumping mortal blood through mortal flesh. But both his heart and his flesh were heeding a call stronger than logic and older than time. He dashed after her, shedding his leather jacket on the way, and catching her only at the top of the spiral stairwell.

Again, he ensnared her in his arms, but she slipped away, ducking through the bedroom door before he could even kiss her. For so long, he'd held himself back, fearing his vampire strength would break mortal bones. Now, that hesitation was proving a disadvantage. He wondered only for a moment if Natalie knew what she was doing, leading him to learn the limits of his mortality, then decided that he didn't care. Diving after her, he managed to catch her boot as she leaped over the side of the bed, pulling it from her foot.

All was fair from then on. Clothing was discarded between kisses and embraces, Natalie slipping away again and again, until he learned to use enough strength to encircle her in his arms. After that, she fought dirty, engaging him with a caress or a kiss, then escaping just beyond his reach when his guard was down. Her laughter was infectious and he found himself smothering her giggles with kisses just to stop himself from laughing aloud.

And when their clothing had been mostly discarded and he pinned her shoulders to the rumpled sheets, grinning at his momentary victory in their mad wrestling match, the fear stole across him again, in a soft and silent sheet of terror. He stared down at her sparkling eyes, her hair tossed back against the pillow, her vulnerable flesh . . . and that knot reappeared in his stomach. He'd gone too far with the game. Now it was serious. It never should have come to this. What if—? What if—?

As if sensing his thoughts, she placed her arms around his neck and drew his mouth down to her lips. Their kiss lasted longer than he thought possible and he suspected he'd never breathe again. But then that was followed by an even longer kiss. And when he breathed, finally, the knot within him had dissolved to nothing.

To love and be loved as a vampire meant falling into a fountain of fire, draining and being drained, with the taste of blood in the mouth and the scent of death in the air. Loving a mortal as a mortal was

existence beyond the passage of time, sensation to the limits of the flesh and beyond, and joy wrapping the dangerous edges of passion in satin and silk and the very threads of life.

And when there was nothing left of mortal passion but sweat and flesh and memory, Natalie snuggled against his chest beneath the blankets, his arm around her. For a moment, he watched the rise and fall of her shoulder as she breathed in mortal slumber, the flicker of her eyelashes against her cheeks as she dreamed.

Then he, too, fell into that warmer, deeper darkness of sleep.

Nick opened his eyes to blackness. Staring into the dark that surrounded him, he licked his lips, willing to give his soul for a glass of water.

The straight-backed chair on which he was seated was anything but comfortable. His hands had been cuffed behind him, to the chair. That much told him he was in one of the smaller interrogation rooms. But why he was here, instead of a cell, was beyond him. Unless . . . the police were going to take care of their little 'problem' by themselves, without public embarrassment.

He had no idea how long he'd been there, or how long they'd leave him alive. He shook with a sudden chill, cold enveloping his senses. And there were other images from his dreams—Natalie in his arms, as a mortal woman, her lips touching him, without fear of fangs or golden eyes. Leaning back his head, he stared in the direction of the ceiling and let the images play across his mind, almost bringing a smile to his lips. Just as well the vampires weren't able to monitor mortal dreams, or his would have been censored.

But then he remembered Janette, lying still and cold beneath the rubble. His hands jerked violently against the cuffs. It was stupid, useless even—handcuffs had been redesigned to withstand the strength of vampire suspects—but he needed to vent his anger and sorrow somehow.

The light flicked on, blinding him. For a moment he closed his eyes and turned his head away from the glare. Footsteps echoed on the tile floor as someone entered, then the door was closed. After blinking for several seconds, he managed to restore his vision enough to recognize the room. It was one of the old interrogation cells, the walls and doors having been reinforced to hold those vampires who failed to turn successfully. There was still spots of blood on the walls and even the ceiling, from the last occupant. They usually battered themselves to oblivion before proper help could be brought. It was up to the police to make sure they didn't take innocent bystanders with them.

Stonetree stood at the door, staring at him. He nodded, his manner no different than it had been when Nick had sat on the other side of the Captain's desk, receiving an assignment. "Knight."

"Captain," he managed, through dry lips.

"There were two of you in the alley. Schanke gave me his version. I'd like to hear yours."

Surprised, Nick met the Captain's even stare for a moment, then looked away. "Why bother? It's Schanke's version that'll turn up in the report."

"Schanke says that you were both jumped in the alley by the bastards who blew up the plant. He said they were mortals. He didn't get a real good look at them because the wall exploded in his face. He says you freaked and shot him—but he blames that on the yahoos who jumped you when you stopped at your place to pick up your badge."

Nick kept his gaze to the wall, trying to comprehend what Stonetree was saying. Schanke had lied. Schanke had lied about being shot by his own partner!

Not being able to help himself, he met Stonetree's eyes.

"Yeah, I know," said Stonetree, his grim expression broken by a slight smirk. "Partners cover partners, but this so full of baloney, I don't know if I can sell it to the brass." Then he shook his head. "I guess you'll get points because those idiots jumped you—they're in a cell down the hall, charged with disorderly conduct and infraction of the turning statute. We'll handle in-house charges later."

"They're dangerous," said Nick.

Stonetree's eyes sparkled. "*They're* idiots. *You're* dangerous." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Right now, you're charged with unlawful discharge of your weapon. Schanke's not pressing charges. In fact, he thinks you should be classed unfit for turning and honorably discharged."

Nick's mouth fell open. Inwardly, he offered thanks to his former partner.

"He won't be by to see you—can't say I blame him." Nick flinched at the Captain's words. "And he wanted me to ask you one thing—were his wife and daughter there last night? He's been on the phone to every hospital and medic center—"

"They're fine," said Nick, with more certitude than he should dare. "They're safe. And they'll stay safe."

"Good. It'll give him peace of mind. And it'll clear whatever you and Schanke have got outstanding between you." Then he met Nick's eyes again, with a gaze that stripped away any hope he'd had of a reprieve. "The brass took Schanke's recommendation under consideration. And they turned it down." He paused, glancing away. "Oh, they think you'll be stable enough as a vampire. But they want you turned, tonight."

Nick straightened in the chair, the cuffs rattling as he tightened his hands into fists. "Against my will?"

"That'd be illegal." Stonetree's smile was grim. "And political disaster, after you became one of the battlefield angels-of-mercy last night. Not wanting to turn would indicate mental instability. If you decline the offer, you get sent out for psychological evaluation."

"And become a *donor*," spat Nick.

"And *disappear*," corrected Stonetree. "They don't want a martyr. They seem to think you have some sort of standing in the community—that if you're turned, the opinion of some of the mortals might shift in our favor. And if you're not turned . . . ."

Stonetree's shrug left nothing to the imagination. Nick looked down at the floor. Either decision was a death sentence. But at least he had a choice in the way he was going to die. Donors didn't come back. Lifting his head, he was ready to announce his decision to Stonetree, when the Captain held up a hand.

"Not yet." He gestured around the room. "First off, this place is clean and you know why . . .you know what happens here. The brass don't want too many of our dirty little secrets on tape. There's no way to see in or out, no way to tell what's going on unless *that* door opens." He gestured toward the door, then, very slightly, indicated the ceiling with a tilt of his head. "This place hasn't been cleaned in a while. So there might be some things lying around. Old stuff. Like paperclips, rubberbands, maybe an old gun from the evidence room, with a pre-chaos bullet in it. Might even be from one of your old cases."

The breath caught in Nick's throat. It took a moment for the Captain's words to sink in. Stonetree was offering him a way out—suicide. But who else would know there was only one bullet in the gun, or that it was harmless to vampires? Maybe he could take a hostage, bluff his way out of the station—

"Those cuffs are coming off only if you give me your word—the gun never leaves this room." Stonetree's eyes were firm and hard. "You're a good cop, Knight. At least, I thought so until last night. That's why I'm doing this for you. If you decide to take the promotion and turn, you're being transferred to another

station tomorrow. If you decide not to turn . . . should be a man's prerogative to live or die as he wants. You served this force as best you could. I owe you that much."

LaCroix would have given his word, taken the gun and a hostage, and tried to escape. But he wasn't LaCroix.

"All right," Nick said, nodding slightly. "If I have to take that way out . . . the gun never leaves this room."

He was surprised to see Stonetree's shoulders relax. The police captain produced a key on a ring from his pocket, then walked over to Nick. He leaned down and turned the key in the cuff locks.

Never forgetting that the man offering him an honorable end was also a vampire, Nick slowly pulled his hands free from the cuffs and rubbed his wrists for a moment, in an attempt to restore circulation. Next, he rose from the chair, leaning heavily on the back, and tested his weight on his legs. His feet tingled, the numbness wearing away slowly.

Stonetree walked to the door and stood there, watching him. When Nick finally met his eyes, he frowned. "One last thing—there's somebody wants to see you. You can say no—" As he spoke, the captain opened the door.

Natalie stood in the doorway. Her crimson lips were drawn into a tight frown, mirroring the captain's. "Hi, Nick," she said hesitantly.

Instantly, he turned his back to her. The first words in his throat nearly choked him. He wanted to tell Stonetree to send her away, that he didn't need this temptation. If anything or anyone could make him turn, it would be Natalie.

And Stonetree knew it.

That's why the words rose to his lips. But they'd never be spoken. Images from his dreams still haunted him. His eyes burned as he thought of what might have been between them, in another world, another place. To be fair to himself—to be fair to her—he would have to say good-bye . . . without losing his life or his soul in the process.

"It's . . . all right," he said, after a moment's pause. Then he turned to face Stonetree. "Could we have a minute, alone?"

Stonetree nodded, sharing a glance with Natalie before he stepped through the doorway and pulled the door closed behind him.

Before he could breath, Natalie ran to him. Throwing her arms around him, she pressed her lips to his, muttering, "Nick, I won't let them take you away. Please, let me do this for you. Let me turn you."

Nick grabbed her shoulders and held her away from him, at arm's length. There was a flash of gold in her eyes. "I'd rather you killed me."

A small snarl escaped her. Brushing away his hands, she stepped away, then glared at him. "You're a complete and utter bastard, you know that? You lead me on all this time, then push comes to shove and now I'm not good enough to turn you?"

He raised a hand to his lips, trying to hide his smile. "Natalie, you know that's not true. It isn't *you*. I don't want to be what you *are*."

"And what's so bad about what I am?" she demanded, eyes sparking.

He had to admit that she had a point there. She was perfection in almost every way—with the exception that she couldn't walk beneath the sun and that her diet consisted of blood. Then again—

"My soul is my own," replied Nick evenly. "We've said this before. I don't want a master, or a sponsor."

"But it wouldn't be *like* that with us," protested Natalie, her artifice of confidence and anger crumbling as she ran back to him. "We'd be equals, partners—"

"Like you were with *your* sponsor?"

Her lips tightened and she turned away. "Don't."

"If he hadn't been killed by mortals, he'd still be here." Taking a step closer, Nick whispered, "Remember what it was like? That petty bureaucrat had you all under his thumb, at his beck and call, his every whim—"

"That was before you could choose your own sponsor," she said defiantly—but most of the spirit was gone from her voice.

"And do you remember what he was like before he turned?" She glanced back at Nick and he nodded, as her eyes widened. "A quiet, unassuming little man. Kind, in his own way. And after he was brought across, he became a tyrant." Smiling sadly, he raised a hand to her cheek. "What would *I* be like, Natalie? I could easily become as loathsome and detestable—"

"Never!" she protested, wrapping her fingers around his.

"And that's only one reason, of a hundred."

He saw the surrender in her eyes, the subtle shift of her shoulders. Crossing her arms, she walked away. "Then, there's no way out, is there? They'll take you away, bleed you until you're dry, and there'll be nothing left of you but ash." Shuddering, she whirled, eyes gold. "I can't let them do that, Nick. I won't let them take you."

"You can't stop them."

"But . . . I could give you an easier death." Eyes still shining gold, Natalie stalked toward him, not seeming to notice as he moved around the chair, putting it between them. "At least, I could live with that memory, feel like I didn't abandon you—"

"But you'd end up turning me," he warned, meeting her eyes, almost daring her to try to mesmerize him. "And I'd never forgive you for that."

She stopped and he knew that the hardness of his eyes and set of his shoulders spoke nothing but the truth. Helplessly, she held out her hands. "Then, there *is* nothing—"

There was no warning. A coldness shot through his chest. Nick grabbed at the remnants of his torn shirt and jacket, falling to his knees against the chair. He held the back rung of the seat for support and closed his eyes as pain swept through him. Dimly he was aware that Natalie was on the floor beside him, calling his name, calling for help.

The pounding in his ears lessened, the pain in his heart receded. Certain it was a heart attack, he wasn't surprised by the sudden numbness in his arms and legs. As his heartbeat slowed, he waited for the darkness to come, pleased at least to have Natalie's arms around him in his last moments. But then something snapped away in his hands. And the sudden pain was fleeing, leaving only the numbness.

Opening his eyes, he raised his hand, finding that he'd wrenched the metal back off the chair. He flinched as the faint scent of blood assaulted him, the dried blood on his clothing and skin, then took a deep breath as a hungry fire raced through him. Dropping the metal chair back to the floor, he struggled out of Natalie's arms, his senses screaming. The seams in the wall stood out as hard lines, as his heightened vision took in every detail of the small room. When his gaze fell on Natalie, he almost gasped, seeing her immortal perfection in every detail. He could even sense the almost non-existent beat of her heart.

Which, a second later, he realized was his own.

Natalie rose to her feet, but stayed where she was, staring at him. "Your eyes," she whispered.

"Nick—but it isn't *possible*. You haven't been turned!"

Nick touched his fingers to his lips in wonder, then stared at his hand. It looked normal enough, as it always had, but the marks from the handcuffs were fading from his wrists. A touch to his face confirmed that the same was happening to the remnants of the scratches he'd received from the blast. Strength flowed through him, he no longer felt beaten and bruised and weary beyond words. He was whole. He was dead.

He was a vampire.

"This can't happen," repeated Natalie, taking a step toward him.

She was right—this *couldn't* happen. To become a vmpire, you had to be turned. But in his dream, his vampire self had gone back across, become mortal. And he'd never heard of *th*at ever happening before, either . . . .

Before his heart could beat, he stood beside her. Catching her wrist, he held her hand to his chest. "Don't question it," he said softly. "Just accept it. For the moment, accept it."

Her dark eyes widened, looking away, then back at him again. After pursing her lips, she nodded hesitantly. "All right. I'll accept it."

"Good. Because it may be my only way out." Releasing her, he walked past the chair, his eyes drawn to the torn metal. "I've been having these dreams—odd dreams—about being a vampire. I haven't been sleeping, figured it was this business with having to turn and—" He looked up at her, suddenly distracted by dream images. "You were there,. You were *mortal*. And *I* was the vampire."

Natalie looked askance and he saw a flicker of fear in her eyes—she thought he was going mad. Shaking his head, he kept his distance from her. "And when I woke up, there were times when I acted like a vampire. I healed quickly. Or when they attacked me in the hallway, I threw one across the room, hard enough to dent the wall. I was mortal, but I had *vampire* strength." He met her eyes, knowing there was so much to say, but not enough time to say it. "Natalie, this could save me. I can get out of here."

"How?" Her steps were slow, still hesitant, as she crossed the room, toward him. "Nick, even as a vampire, you couldn't get past all those cops and all those guns. Granted, I'd be a willing hostage, but still—"

"They'll let me go if I turn. Stonetree promised as much." He smiled. "So let's not and say you did."

"Turn you?" Natalie stared at him as if certain he *were* mad, then shook her head sharply, dismissing the notion. "No. It's too quick. You wouldn't be up and around yet. It takes too long—"

"So, what if I played dead?" Without another word, he let himself slump to the floor, motionless. Concentrating on his heartbeat, he slowed it even further.

"Nick!" He heard Natalie drop to her knees beside him, one hand opening his eyelid. He tried not to move as light glared into his eyes. Then, as he felt her panic set in, reached up and grabbed her arm, causing her to let out a short scream of surprise.

She slapped his face, hard, but it only stung for a second. "Bastard! You took ten years off my life with that stunt."

"You can spare it." He forced back a grin, sobering almost instantly as he propped himself up on his elbows. "You've seen newly turned. Will it work?"

Natalie stared off into space, stroking her lower lip with her finger, thoughtfully. "Maybe. It wouldn't bear close inspection, but everybody's queasy about the newly turned. You never know when one can backfire—"

"Which is why you'll want to keep an eye on me, take me home," he prompted.

"Yeah, *now* you say that." But Natalie nodded again. "It might work. But . . . how long will this last? If it wears off while we're still trying to pass you off as—"

"It's the only chance I've got." Reaching up, he took her hand in hers, squeezing it. "I know it puts you in danger. If you can't go through with it—?"

Natalie raised his hands to her lips, kissing his knuckles. "Ten minutes ago I was offering to kill you. Believe me, this option I can live with." Dropping his hand to his chest, she hissed, "Now be a good Nick and play dead."

Letting his hand fall back to his side, he turned his face to the wall, hoping that the bits of shirt and jacket gathered around his neck would hide the lack of a wound. In his mind's eyes, he saw Natalie cross the floor, the click of her heels across the tile more than audible to his vampire hearing. He could imagine her standing in the doorway, opening the door.

At first, he heard the noises of police business along the corridor. The room was located at the back of the building, near an alley exit—the newly-turned who weren't going to make it were quickly hidden away, to enact their few last mad hours in solitary agony—and he couldn't have wished for a better place. But even the few noises in the hallway—footsteps, and filing cabinet drawers, and voices in mid-conversation—stopped instantly when Natalie opened the door.

"It's done," she said, with such a tremor in her voice that he almost smiled, remembering barely in time that he was supposed to be dead.

Stonetree's footsteps were easily recognized—slow and heavy. "Did you—?"

"Turn him? Yes." She cleared her throat. "It wasn't entirely his choice."

Stonetree's voice was meant to be comforting. "You did him a favor, Nat. You'll want to check on him before we—"

"I'm taking him home."

The steel in her tone almost sent a shiver through Nick. Again, he thanked himself that he hadn't fallen to the temptation Natalie had offered. Sponsor or Master, the word was just a word—they never would have been partners in death In the end, he would have had to fight her for control of his own soul. And he wasn't certain he'd have won.

The sound seemed to affect Stonetree, too. Before he could respond, Natalie added, quietly, "He's been traumatized. And this is the first time I've tried this. He has to come across safely, for my own sake, as well as his own. He needs my help, *my* attention . . . not some mortal nurse, with a ward of fifty newly-turned to care for." He barely heard the added whisper, "We don't want to bring him back *here*, do we?"

He could almost feel Stonetree's stare, hear the captain running over the options in his mind. His shoes squeaked on the tile floor as he shifted his weight. "All right. I'll call for the EMT's. They'll take you back to your place. And I'll be sending a patrol around, to keep an eye—"

"I told you, he's been traumatized. By *your* cops. You know he was uncertain about turning. If a uniform, *any* uniform shows up while he's still in transition . . . well, I won't take responsibility for it. And I'll put that in writing for the report, right now."

He didn't envy Stonetree. Facing Natalie on the warpath left two choices—you either got out of her way or you got run over. Normally, Stonetree wasn't a man to step aside, but he heard the hesitation in the captain's voice. "There's something you should know . . . I think he's connected to the mortal resistance underground. If they heard he turned, they might try to kill him. And they're desperate enough to send you with him."

"They'd have to find him, first. Which is another good reason not to have lights and sirens flashing in

my neighborhood. In a couple of days, when he's over the burn-in, maybe then we can talk about protective custody."

Again, Stonetree hesitated. Nick would have held his breath, if there was any air in his lungs. "If you're sure you can handle him—"

"I'm a big girl, Captain. I'll take care of him."

"You know what you're doing. I'll clear the corridor for you, have someone bring your car around back." He took two steps down the corridor, then paused again, steel in *his* voice, this time. "Make sure you bring him back, Dr. Lambert."

"I will. Eventually."

Nick almost couldn't wait until the door closed. The instant it had, he leaped off the floor, which startled Natalie and sent her crashing into the back side of the door.

"Don't *do* that!" she hissed angrily.

"He bought it?"

"Yes." She wiped her fingers across her brow. "Can they stake you for lying to a police captain?"

"And harboring a fugitive? And faking a turning? And—"

"I think I liked you better when you were dead." Then she held up a warning finger, her smile sharp. "And no additional comments, please." Then, her eyes softened. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

Before he could blink, Natalie reached forward and slung him over her shoulder. "Hang limp," she said, shifting his weight easily.

"That's easy for you to say." He closed his eyes, suddenly dizzy, and realized that he was very lucky none of the escape route involved trying to fly. When he opened his eyes, it was another matter entirely. "The view's not bad."

"I don't think you were this sarcastic as a mortal," she hissed. Then, he was jolted slightly as she took a step forward, reaching for the door. "Time to play dead, again."

Closing his eyes, he concentrated on slowing his heartbeat to almost imperceptible levels. It was harder to play dead when slung upside down over Natalie's shoulder, walking through what Stonetree had promised would be a cleared corridor. But there were offices there. And it wouldn't have taken vampire senses to hear the creak of hinges as doors opened slightly, to peer at them as they passed. It wasn't his most dignified exit from the station, but it would be his last . . . with luck.

They made it past the heavy metal door that faced the alley, but still he didn't dare open his eyes. Once outside the air conditioning, he was afraid he'd start to sweat, but the heat of the night didn't bother him. His senses screamed that it wasn't that far from dawn—vampire survival warnings ringing in his mortal brain.

The car doors seemed to have been left open. Natalie lowered him into the passenger seat, slipping the seatbelt over him. He kissed her neck as she leaned over him and she froze, then took great care in slamming the door passenger door as hard as she could.

His ears echoed with the sound of the slam for several seconds, long enough for her to sit down behind the wheel on the driver's side. Nick heard the engine roar, then fell against the belt slightly as the car moved out of the alley. It was then that he noticed the humming in his ears, interrupting the silence that should have been broken only by the sound of the engine. His strength seemed to ebb away and he slumped back against the seat, exhausted. He wanted to open his eyes, to see Natalie one last time with that exquisite vampire sight, but he didn't dare move, didn't dare take anything more than the shallowest

of breaths, until she gave the all clear.

After what seemed like an eternity, she sighed. "All right. I suppose we're safe enough."

Nick opened his eyes, focusing at the street beyond the windshield. It *was* quite close to dawn; he saw the violet of the eastern sky already giving way to blues and grays and oranges and reds. There were few cars on the road, these last being the few vampires who were racing back to their sanctuaries, before the daylight burned them to cinders.

They were about thirty minutes from the station. "We've come quite a distance."

"Yeah, well, maybe I was tired of hearing your wisecracks. You're cute when you're asleep . . . and quiet." When he met her eyes, she frowned, her eyes going back to the road. "You're back, aren't you? You've gone mortal again."

"Disappointed?"

She pursed her lips. "Does it matter? You wouldn't be able to tell if I were lying."

"There *are* ways other than counting heartbeats to know someone's giving you a story. I was a cop, a mortal cop, after all."

"Yeah. You were."

Her confirmation of that past tense disturbed him, almost as much as her having avoided answering his question.

"So, where do I take you?" asked Natalie, her voice even.

They were on a back street, off the main route. One of LaCroix's many safehouses, the one secondary to his old apartment, was no more than five blocks away. "You'd better drop me at the corner. It's almost dawn, you should get back—"

"I'll take you where you need to go," said Natalie firmly. "I won't have anybody say I left you to walk the streets."

Nick started to argue, then bit back the words and leaned against the seat. Rubbing his eyes with his fingers, he realized how tired he was. In some way, he'd disappointed all of the people who'd mattered to him, both human and mortal—LaCroix, Schanke, Natalie, Stonetree . . . Janette. Putting his life back together wasn't going to be easy, especially as a fugitive. He needed time to think, but time was a luxury he didn't have. He'd have to come up with a plan to cover Natalie, another to get out of the city, and he'd never been particular good at plans.

But he knew someone who was. And . . . maybe he didn't have to disappoint *all* of them. "Turn here. Right. Then right again."

Natalie glanced at him, her eyes meeting his, filled with curiosity, but she did as he asked, turning the car down a side street. "You've got a plan. I can tell."

"I've got a way to keep you safe."

"For the day."

"Longer than that . . . hopefully." As they cruised down the back street, he kept his eyes open for the alley. "Turn here. Stop the car. And wait until I signal you."

Again, she gave him a curious glance, but turned where he asked. Once the car was stopped, she twisted to look at him. "Are we gonna talk about this?"

"There's no time." After he unbuckled the seatbelt, he leaned across the car, planting a kiss on her cheek. "Trust me, Natalie."

"Oh yeah, sure. Trust—"

He closed the passenger door after he left the car, cutting off her comments. Outside the air

conditioning of the car, the summer heat assaulted him again. Looking up at what he could see of the lightening sky between the two buildings that formed the alley, he realized the day was going to be another scorcher . . . in more ways than one.

The door was set back into the wall, another basement entrance. Trust LaCroix to keep up the image of rats scurrying behind the wall-boards. Nick walked down the steps, then knocked at the steel door.

The door flew open almost immediately, one of the mortals relocated from his apartment building flying out the door, staring at him. "Christ, Nick, we thought you were dead! After that cop in the alley—"

"Get LaCroix. Now," he commanded. "I'm in a hurry. We don't have much time."

The man nodded, then disappeared back inside, the lock clicking in place behind him. Nick knew there'd be arguments among the lower echelons as to whether it was really him, if he was about to betray them to the police, and a half dozen other plots and possible plans. Word would reach LaCroix within minutes. He didn't have much more time than that.

Leaning his forehead against the still-cool brick that formed the cellar entrance, Nick looked down at his hand in the dim light. At least he was well enough to travel, after he'd had a chance to rest up a bit.

The door flew open sooner than he'd expected. He took a step back, raising his hand to signal Natalie, who he'd knew would be able to see the movement, despite the approaching dawn.

LaCroix leaned out the door and stared at him for a moment.

"It's only me," said Nick quietly. "And I've brought a friend who needs protection."

"You should be dead."

Nick knew he was being studied for any signs of duplicity or vampirism. The fact that there wasn't a mark on him wasn't helping. And he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that LaCroix's other hand, hidden behind the door, held a gun that contained bullets that would kill mortals or vampires. "I should. But, like I said, I had help in getting out. I got tired of waiting for you."

At that, LaCroix's lips twisted into a half-smile. He stepped forward as Nick came down the steps—he was right, there was a gun in his hand.

But it wasn't about to be used on him. LaCroix grabbed his hand, then embraced him. When he stepped back, his smile dissolved. "You know about . . . Janette?"

Nick looked down and away. His brief time as a vampire hadn't healed that hidden wound. "Yes. I saw her." He looked up only when LaCroix's hand fell on his shoulder.

"It was her choice to be there," said LaCroix. "I tried to make her stay behind, with the children and some of the others. She wouldn't listen to me."

For a moment, Nick met his friend's eyes, surprised. The break in his voice matched the look in his eyes—a wounded, haunted look. LaCroix, who'd spoken only of his lost family in abstract terms, who'd seemed to miss his stolen music more than anything, was mourning for Janette. It was only a momentary lapse, the eyes hardened quickly, but the fact that it had happened at all gave Nick hope that his spur-of-the-moment plan would succeed.

A shadow fell across them. Instantly, LaCroix tossed the gun into his right hand, placing his back against the metal door. Staring at Nick, he asked, "Is this a trap?"

Nick stepped forward, pulling the gun to himself, holding LaCroix's arm and aim at his own heart. "I told you, I brought a friend to meet you."

Natalie hurried down the steps. Seeing the gun, she pulled back slightly and hissed at LaCroix, ready to launch herself at him.

"One of them?" asked LaCroix, angrily.

It was a stand-off. If Natalie moved, Nick would be shot. And LaCroix wouldn't be able to shoot Nick before Natalie would get him.

Nick smiled, noting that this combination had definite possibilities. "Dr. Natalie Lambert, this is LaCroix. LaCroix, you remember my friend, the vampire coroner." When they continued to glare at one another, he added, "She saved my life, helped me escape from the station when *you* couldn't." A quick glance from LaCroix told him the idea of a rescue had been entertained, then discarded. "They gave me a choice—turn or die. Natalie got me out of there, intact and mortal."

He felt LaCroix's grip on the gun lessen. After meeting Nick's eyes, LaCroix nodded toward Natalie, with that arrogant civility it seemed only he could master. "Then I owe you my thanks, Dr. Lambert."

"I did it for Nick, not for you," she answered sharply.

"And she'll be up on charges if we don't find a way to cover her. Natalie was supposed to turn me. I'm supposed to be back at her place. And if I don't show up after a couple of days—"

LaCroix nodded, eyeing Natalie thoughtfully. "Yes, I see. I suppose something could be arranged. A break in."

"Stonetree wanted to provide police protection—he thought some of your people might come after Nick, if they found out he'd turned." Natalie smiled. "So, if I had to run out to pick up some supplies, then found what was left of Nick when I returned . . . ."

Matching her smile, LaCroix turned to Nick. "I like the way her mind works. That would be just the thing. Of course, we'd need some of your clothes. And vampire ashes."

"I *am* the coroner," said Natalie smoothly. "Add together a few spoons from some urns and who's going to know the difference?"

"Done." Then, seeing Natalie glance uneasily behind her, Nick added, "She'll need a place inside, for the day."

LaCroix nodded. "Agreed."

"Nick can find me something." Natalie walked down the rest of the steps, as LaCroix lowered the gun. "I don't want to put you out."

"Nick has to disappear."

She stared at LaCroix, then turned flashing eyes at Nick. "No. You can't just bring me here and leave me . . . with *him*?"

He took her hands in his. "I can't stay here, especially after I'm declared dead and gone. That would put you in danger, as well as the others here. If they hunt me down, they'll go through every one of you to find me."

"Others?" Her eyes widened. "What *others*?"

"Mortals, all," explained LaCroix. The lazy smile rose to his lips as he added, "You're our first vampire. Congratulations."

"Now wait-a-minute—"

Nick raised a hand to her cheek. "You want to be mortal. Think, Natalie, you can't be the only one of your kind who feels like that. Schanke, for sure, and at least a half-dozen of the other family men on the force. And how many more outside?" When she looked away, he moved his fingers to her lips, bringing her gaze back to him. "LaCroix can help you get the supplies you need, help you with your research. You can help him get the information he needs to protect his people . . . within reason."

"Reason being dictated by necessity," said LaCroix, smiling slyly.

"Reason being dictated by *humanity*." Releasing Natalie, Nick took a step toward LaCroix. "She'll be able to temper your violent streak. I tried and failed. Because of that, Janette died. But maybe you won't be able to sway Natalie as easily. Let her be the judge of what's in the best interest of mortals, of what's *right*."

At the mention of Janette, LaCroix looked away. "Perhaps," he relented, after a few seconds of silence. He met Nick's eyes. "Although the memory of what happened to Janette may do more toward that end than any of *her* words." He looked up, at the sky, then back at Natalie. "Give me a moment with them. If I walk in with you now, we may have some difficulty."

Natalie shivered, taking her own look at the ever-lightening sky, but acquiesced. "All right."

As LaCroix reached for the door, Nick added, "And I'm still taking Myra and Jenny with me. If something happens and they start after me, they'll be looking for a man, not a man accompanied by a woman and child."

There was a slight sound from Natalie and LaCroix turned to look at Nick. "You're sure? You want that responsibility?"

"I owe that much to Schanke, to keep them safe. There's nothing for them here." Then he met Natalie's eyes. "Yet."

"I'll tell them," promised LaCroix. Giving Natalie a nod, he opened the door and entered the basement.

"You seem so sure of yourself that I'll go along with this," said Natalie, turning away from him.

Nick placed his arms around her, standing behind her. "I was sure of *you*."

He felt her fingers, as she ran her hand along his arm. "Before, at least, we could see each other. And now . . . you'll be so far away."

"Not in my dreams."

"But, you're leaving me."

"For now."

She turned in his arms. When he went to speak, she raised a finger, touching his lips. "I'll find you," she promised. "When things are different here, when I've found a cure, I'll bring you back."

"Ah, but you have the luxury of time," he whispered in her ear. "I don't. I'm mortal."

Natalie pushed him away and crossed her arms. Gesturing toward the closed door, she asked, "What about *them*? What's going to happen to all of those refugees?"

"I'm certain you and LaCroix will work something out."

"Don't they mean anything to you? Don't *I* mean anything to you?"

Again, Nick moved forward to put his arms around her, but she slipped away, her back still toward him. "Yes," he admitted, after a second's pause. "More than you'll ever know." He touched her shoulder, turning her toward him, and grabbed her hand. Placing the palm of her hand against his chest, he said, "But this—warm flesh, a beating heart—means even more to me. I don't know if you'll ever understand—"

"I *do*," she said, her hand falling away, but her eyes locking with his. "I hate you for it, but I do understand. You know, by the time I wake up, you'll be long gone . . . ."

When she leaned closer, her lips brushing his, he placed his arms around her shoulders. He could feel the tension in her, knew that she closed her eyes so that he wouldn't see the dark give way to gold and red, as she fought back the blood passion that doomed any relationship between them. It was not a long, breath-taking kiss, but it was sweet. Natalie broke away from him only when the door opened.

LaCroix stepped through. Glancing at her, and then Nick, he nodded delicately, then gestured her

inside. "We're ready for you, now. Well, as ready as we can be."

"Thank you." Slipping her fingers from his hands, maintaining contact as long as possible, she backed away, toward the door. Natalie turned once, a hint of crimson at the corner of her eyes. Then she took LaCroix's hand and walked through the door.

There was no backward glance. The door closed behind them. Nick stared at it for a moment, wondering if he'd made the right decision, but then realizing that it was too much too ask of her, to be so close and yet not dare the boundaries that signaled danger for them both. If he was to remain mortal, he would have to leave her behind. And, who knew what would happen? One day, between her efforts and LaCroix's, the world might be different. When that day came, he'd return to her. But until then . . . .

Slowly, Nick walked up the steps of the basement, heading into the alley to watch the brilliant streaks of dawn segue to blue skies and bright sunshine. It was going to be a beautiful day for traveling.

At first, Nick was blinded by the light. It shone so brilliantly through the window, engulfing his vision, that he thought he'd gone blind. But when he raised his hand before his eyes, he could still see. And the light shone just as strong and as sweet and as pure.

Natalie was lying beside him, her head resting on his chest. She was silent, still sleeping, still dreaming.

And was he still dreaming, as well? Or was this real? Had he truly come back across that divide between life and death and become mortal again?

He touched his lips to her bare shoulder, then slid out of bed, not wanting to wake her. Mortality reasserted itself as the cold assailed him and he draped his black bathrobe around his shoulders quickly, then padded through the bedroom in search of his pajama bottoms. All the while, Natalie remained sleeping, oblivious to the morning light or to his stumbling around, cold feet on cold floor.

The thought struck him that she was *too* still and fear lodged in his heart. He leaned over the bed and placed his hand on her neck, along the edge of her jaw, looking for a pulse. The warmth of her skin alone was enough to convince him, but her hurried, mortal heartbeat confirmed that she was alive.

She stirred beneath his hand and he backed away quickly, suddenly ill at ease. What should he say? What should he do?

Then Nick remembered the bag she'd brought with her the night before. He'd guessed then that it might contain her remedy for his lack of dreamless sleep, but Natalie was the sort who anticipated nearly any situation. With luck, she'd brought some kind of food for herself. And there was certainly some coffee or tea or hot chocolate still in his cupboards, from her various visits.

He smiled as he padded out of the bedroom, knowing that she hadn't anticipated his becoming a mortal last night. And breakfast from his hands would be yet another chance to amaze the normally unflappable Dr. Lambert.

Standing at the top of the staircase, he looked over the loft from his perch. Closing the shutters last night had been the last thing on his mind, so they were still wide open, the room bathed in morning sunlight. The window glass might have been dirty in patches, but that meant nothing to the sun, or to him. In fact, the spots of stair and floor that fell within the reach of sunlight were warmer on his bare feet. He found himself making a game of finding the best path across the cold floor and made a mental note to recarpet the place completely, fix the loft's furnace, and buy himself a pair of slippers. If this was one of the downsides of mortality, he could live with it.

On his way to the window, Nick brushed against the coffee table and something fell to the floor—the

dream doll. He picked it up, noticing that the head had pressing tightly against the chest, so that it now formed an oddly shaped wicker ball. Laughing lightly, he threw it up in the air and caught it in one hand, knowing that he'd lived through the last of the dreams. He'd known his heart's desire. He *was* alive.

He continued to the window, still holding the doll in his hand. The word outside was bright and light, the sun glistening off the ice-covered snow-drifts. It had snowed again during the night and he noticed, with some chagrin, that Natalie's car was now half-buried in a drift due to the fallen snow and some maniac plow driver. To hell with breakfast—she'd probably appreciate him digging out her car. Then again, he hoped she wouldn't be in such a hurry to leave. Not when they had to make up for so much time . . . .

The doll moved in his hand. Holding his palm open, Nick watched in surprise as the legs, then the arms of the doll started to unfold. Finally, the head twisted back of its own accord, until it was as straight and unbent as when he'd first seen it, in the box at Natalie's lab.

That's when his hand started to smoke.

With a yell, Nick dropped the doll to the floor, then ran from the sunlight, vaulting the couch and diving for the shutter controls on the coffee table. Instinct drove him to duck behind the shadow of the couch as he punched the buttons frantically. The motorized shutters groaned into place, sealing him in darkness once again.

For an instant, he sat on the floor by the couch, stunned, his burned hand clutched to his chest. Then Nick tilted back his head and let out an anguished roar, the anger and frustration welling up from the darkness inside him, pouring forth in sound. His eyes glowed and his fangs descended as he scrambled from behind the couch and hunted on his hands and knees for the doll.

Another hand was wrapped around the doll when he spotted it, fingers long and nails lacquered with a violet nail polish. Bereft of her cloak, she was dressed in the same colors as the night before, hues of violet silk that drifted around her like a snow fall. Her eyes were sad as she straightened, the doll held in her fingers.

Nick scrambled to his feet, his eyes still glowing. "Why did you do this to me?" he roared. "I never harmed you. Why?"

A mortal would have backed away, fainted, or turned tail and run from those gold eyes and sharp fangs. She never lost her even composure, although the sadness reached her lips, turning down the corners. "It's always the same with you, isn't it?" she said softly. Turning away, she walked into the living room, gently touching the doll in her hand. "Must everything be a reward or punishment? Can't things simply *happen*?"

"It didn't work." Nick kept on her heels. "In case you haven't noticed, I've turned back."

"I never said you wouldn't. Or that you'd change at all. I only said you'd know if you had the strength to pursue your heart's desire. And what that truly was."

"And that's supposed to make me happy?"

"No." When she turned, her violet eyes regarded him thoughtfully. "That was never part of the bargain. All you asked for was the doll. And all the doll gave you were dreams."

Fragments of the final dream came back to him—escape and survival, setting up a partnership between vampire and mortal, saying good-bye to Natalie, watching the dawn . . . all of it happened only because his other self had changed from mortal to vampire, however briefly. It was unheard of, *impossible*—just like a vampire becoming mortal, for a time. "Was it real?" he asked, still dazzled by that dream dawn. "Was *he* real? The other me?"

"Who is the dream and who the dreamer? Was he part of your dream, or you part of his?" When he stared at her, she smiled, raising her free hand to her lips. "When you *do* ask questions, Detective Knight, you never ask easy ones. And it would take one wiser and older than I to answer you truly."

Nick walked back to the window and placed his hand on the frame. "He got away," he said aloud, turning over the images in his mind. "He survived because he took a part of me and I . . . took a part of him."

"It was *your* dream, *chevalier*." When Nick glared at her, she looked down. "Yes, he survived. Because some part of you, the vampire, became part of him. And, for that time, you were permitted to taste mortality again."

"But it didn't *last*!"

"It wasn't supposed to. Dreams never do, Detective." She met his eyes evenly, not seeming to notice the anger that flickered there. "Don't blame him—it wasn't his doing."

"You planned this," he accused. "You *used* me—"

"You *asked* for the doll. You opened the door to dreams, to heart's desire." She smiled, slightly, and shrugged. "I merely made certain that you opened a door that could cause some good. Your brief mortality was your reward, not your due. Accept that and move on, back to what you were."

Nick turned and reached out his hand, palm upward, his eyes fixing on the doll. "Give it back to me."

She held it up between her fingers, her lips set in an even line. Suddenly, it turned to ash, falling to the carpet, the tiny face no longer frozen in a look of perpetual amazement. "It can only be used once."

His staring at the pile of ash made no difference to her, or what had once been the dream doll. Nick stalked past her, to the foot of the staircase, the cold floor no longer bothering him. He stared upward, at the closed door of the bedroom, then turned on her. "Get me another."

"Is that what you want, Detective Knight? To live in dreams?"

His gaze returned to the closed bedroom door. Natalie . . . . "If that's the only way."

"To have your heart's desire? But you still don't know what it is, do you?" When he turned to glare at her, she ducked her head, trying to hide her smile. "Mortality? Redemption? Salvation?" When he didn't answer, she turned away, but he noticed that her smile had faded long before she turned. "To love . . . and to be loved—that's the heart's desire. No man could wish for more. Or should." Very carefully, she seated herself on his couch, her hands touching the leather lightly, as if she were afraid she would sink through it. "I live in dreams, Detective Knight. I travel the dark ways of the heart, pass through the doorways of nightmare." She looked at him, her eyes dark violet, large and empty. "The heart's desire is the only true light."

Nick curled his hand into a fist and struck the banister of the stair, bending the metal. "Fool!" he hissed beneath his clenched teeth. "Why was I so stupid to believe that I could ever—" Then, he stopped and stared at her. "What do I do now?"

She started, meeting his gaze with a surprised expression. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're an advisor. Give me some advice."

A frown touched her lips. "You've had the benefit of my counsel twice—that's more than most receive—and you've ignored me both times."

"The first, yes." Nick found his gaze traveling to the pile of ash, wishing that he'd never demanded that she give it to him. "But I did as you said—I dreamed the last dream."

"I told you to share what you'd been given with *no one*." Pointedly, she arched an eyebrow and tilted her head to the staircase. "Am I to assume you followed my advice?"

Nick rubbed his hand along his chin. "That's why you wouldn't read Natalie's tarot. You knew this would happen."

She shrugged, her white shoulders shifting beneath the film of the violet dress. "The cards might have indicated it, but so much of her future rested with you, continues to rest with you." Reaching out to the coffee table, she touched the surface as if turning a card, while staring into space. "There are too many choices, decisions yet to be faced and made . . . ." Shaking her head, she leaned back and met his gaze. "Her future rests between you. As does your own."

He walked back to the staircase and leaned his hand against it. Again, he looked toward the bedroom door, memories of a mortal Natalie, *his* Natalie, clashing with images of a vampire. "How could he leave her?"

"In your dream?" When he looked back at her, she smiled. "Perhaps he knew his heart's desire. If the choice was your own, could you choose between love and life? Think carefully before you answer, Detective Knight."

Nick opened his mouth, thinking he knew the answer, then paused.

"I thought not." She rose from the couch gracefully, then stepped forward to take his hand in her own. "I must go."

He held tightly to her hand, walking beside her as she moved through the living room, but dug his feet in as they reached the couch. "No—you can't go. I don't know what to do." When she glared at him over her shoulder, violet eyes dark and flashing, Nick dropped her hand. "Please, one last time, you *have* to help me."

"I can't. You've had my advice twice, already. A third time would do nothing for you." But as Nick stared at her, some small shred of pride holding him back from pleading, she seemed to relent. " There is a way, but there may be trouble later . . . ."

"No more trouble than I'm in now." Again, he looked up toward the top of the staircase, over his shoulder. "We've walked through the door. It's done. And it's going to happen again. But this time, I'll kill her." He turned tortured eyes to her. "I *can't* leave her. I'm not like *him*."

She seemed to weigh his words, lips pursed. "All right. One last time. But then you'll be quit of me, forever?"

"Yes. Yes, of course," said Nick quickly. Exhausted, he dropped down to the couch and sat there, staring up expectantly.

She sat down on the couch beside him. For a moment, she looked troubled, her lips drawn tight in a frown, then she sighed and took his hand. "If what passed between you and her were nothing more than a dream—?"

"You're going to make me think that it was all a dream?"

"Not all. Just . . . part." Her eyes moved past him, toward the staircase. "I'll admit, her sleep through all of your ranting hasn't been natural. It would be the work of a moment to touch her mind, make her believe that what passed between you two last night was a fantasy, an illusion of sleep."

"And you can do that? Without hurting Natalie?"

"It's within my power. As to whether I'm *permitted*?" She shrugged again, that sad smile returning. "I've been denied *my* heart's desire, in my time. What more punishment could there be for me than that? And if this should ease your way, I can content myself with another in a long line of small victories." With her free hand, she ran her knuckles lightly along his cheek. "But do *you* wish to remember the truth . . . or the dream?"

Again, he paused, caught in the dilemma of decision. He stared across the room, turning over the consequences in his mind. To know what he and Natalie shared might give him the strength to continue in his quest. But also knowing that they might never have that again, that she would never know what had passed between them wasn't a fancy of sleep . . . it could drive him mad.

"A dream would be kinder," she whispered.

And, when he nodded his agreement, ever so hesitantly, she smiled. Still holding his hand, she rose to her feet and gazed down at him, with those large, violet eyes. "All right, *chevalier*. It was nothing more than a dream."

As she spoke, Nick found his eyes growing heavy. He struggled to stay awake, to hear her. He even tried to pull his hand away to rub his eyes, but she held it tightly.

"You'll sleep now—a restful, dreamless sleep. You'll both sleep, until the sun sets. And when you wake, all will be as it was between you, before last night. "

Nick closed his eyes, his head falling back against the couch. As if from a long distance away, he heard her chuckle. "Oh . . . and you *should* rescue her car from that snow drift, brave *chevalier*. You owe the lady that much, I think."

For an instant, he thought he felt the press of lips against his forehead. "Sleep well, Detective Knight. May you have none but pleasant dreams."

And Nick fell into a soft and comforting darkness, the thought that he might have made another mistake dissolving into a peaceful, silent slumber.

Chapter Titles

Chapter 1
"A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes," Mack David, Al Hoffman, and Jerry Livingstone
From Walt Disney's "Cinderella"

Chapter 2
"The Raven," Edgar Allan Poe, 1845

Chapter 3
"Darkness," Lord Byron, 1816

Chapter 4
"A Dream Within a Dream," Edgar Allan Poe, 1827

Chapter 5
Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Caroll, 1872

THE DARK
THE NIGHT